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The PLAINS SCOUT
An Exciting Novelet
By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

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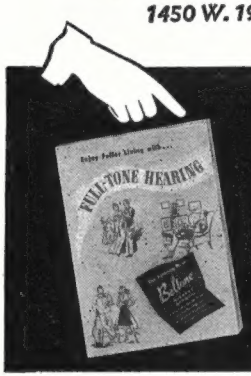

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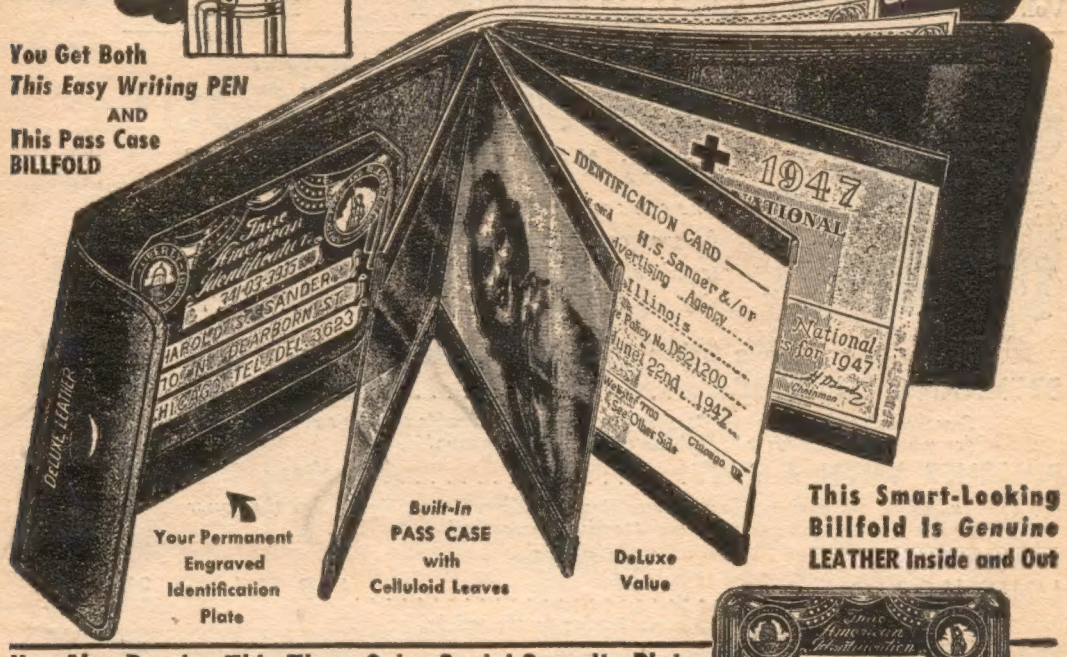

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THRILLING RANCH STORIES

Vol. XXXVI, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION November, 1947

Featured Frontier Novelet

THE PLAINS SCOUT

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

The cards were stacked against Dall Stockton when he was court-martialed out of the Army, but at track's end a new hand was dealt out for a rapid-fire gun-blazing showdown! 11

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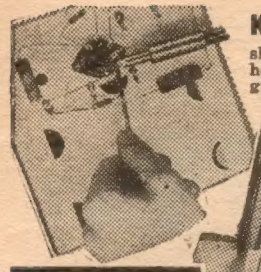

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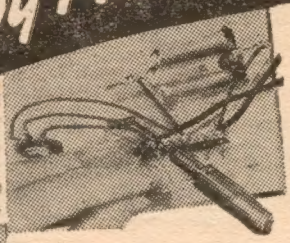

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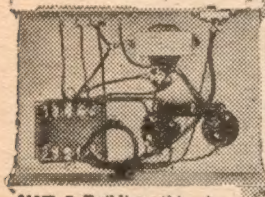

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A Department for Readers Conducted by TEX BROWN

HOLA, ever'body, and welcome as the prodigal son! Ain't no fatted calf or banquet o' any kind in yore honor, but there's sure a warm handclasp and friendly smiles all around when rannies and gals ride up to this old Brandin' Fire, betcha! All you gotta do is light, rub down yore sweatin' broncs, then hunker down beside the fire and make yoreselves plumb comfortable like. Looks like life is sure mighty happy and interestin' to you fellahs and gals.

That's sure mighty fine, but I reckon it wouldn't hurt none to recall, now and then, how it was in the makin' o' this old West by them pioneerin' ancestors o' ours. 'Course you've got yore problems, and once in a while life is gonna get sort o' complex and seem durned hard to cope with.

When such times come remember Grandma and Grandpa livin' in their crude cabin, totin' water from a spring somewhere, more often than not, not even the simpliest conveniences o' life, and with loop-holes in their cabin for wardin' off attacks by redskins.

Yet Grandma followed her man. She knew, jest as you know today, that she'd be happier with him than waitin' for him back in comfort—alone.

A Girl's Decision

Pretty dark-eyed little Louisa Frederici had to make that decision. She fell in love with handsome, stalwart, young Bill Cody, and she had to decide between stayin' behind in the gay city o' St. Louis with friends and family, and goin' into the untamed West, full o' danger and hardships.

Louisa didn't clearly understand at the time just how hard, how terrifyin' that frontier life would be, though her lover tried to tell her. But I reckon she would o' made the same decision, if she had known, 'cause that's the way with love, then and now, eh, fellahs and gals?

Well, Louisa's heart made the decision for her and she married Bill Cody, her "Willy", and they left St. Louis on a old stern-wheeler boat, goin' up the Mississippi River to Fort Leavenworth, then a new, raw frontier post. The honeymoon went fine.

They were young, madly in love with each other, and as happy as two people could be, until Louisa saw a man shot and killed at a river landin' one day. She was standin' at the rail, dreamily watchin' some stevedores load up, when there was a sudden quarrel, a loud report from a gun, and a man toppled over on his face dead, before her eyes.

Louisa screamed in horror, and clutched her husband frantically as his strong arms gathered her close to his broad chest.

Frontier Life Was Hard

As Bill Cody held the white and tremblin' girl in his arms he understood for the first time jest how hard the frontier life o' his West was goin' to be on his young wife. She was convent bred, knew only a soft life and civilization. The man knew that this was only the beginnin'; she was bound to see life in the raw, more and more of it. The knowledge that she was unfitted for such a life swept him like a chill wind. He held her close.

"We'll go back to St. Louis, Louisa," he told her. "I'll give up my job o' scoutin' for the gover'ment, and we'll make us a home where life will be right for you, honey."

"Wherever You Go—"

Louisa didn't answer for a moment. She could feel the cord-like muscles o' his arms

(Continued on page 8)

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*E. N. J., New York.

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"I enjoyed taking this course and I get a lot of pleasure out of it. I have made much progress and have many invitations to play at parties. I owe you much for making this possible."

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AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

(Continued from page 6)

as they held her, feel the conflict goin' on inside his strong, man's heart, and she knew his adventurous soul belonged among the men and forces that was makin' the new country—openin' up the great West. She straightened in his arms and met his eyes with as much courage as she could call to her aid.

"No, Willy," she said, "you'll go on, and I'll go with you, wherever you go, forever."

The girl couldn't know how impossible it would be for her to go with him wherever he went. She couldn't guess how often she must be left behind while he rode in the service o' his gover'ment. But she was to learn, and soon.

Raids and Scalpings

They had no sooner got to Fort Leavenworth than he was obliged to go scoutin' with the troops, into the Indian country across Kansas. She heard stories, after he'd gone, of Indian raids and scalpin's that made her blood fair run cold, and every minute he was away she was sick with uneasiness for his safety.

A little dark-haired daughter was born to her at Leavenworth, and the only way to send word to Bill Cody was by a courier on horseback. It was weeks before he got the word that he was a father.

He come ridin' through the night like a wild man, his heart on fire with love and anxiety for Louisa, and they had a few days together, enjoyin' their baby, before startin' out across the plain.

He took her with him when it was time to go. Proudly he told her that he was owner of a whole town on the trail the Kansas Pacific Railroad would take. Already there was a hundred houses at his town—Rome. They would be rich!

A Grim Picture

On the way, at a place called Three Wells, they come upon the charred remains o' a wagon train. Injuns had surrounded the outfit, killin' every man, woman, and child, and burnin' the great wagons to cinders. Horror struck to the heart o' Louisa, for it was sure a grim picture.

(Continued on page 104)

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Stockton leaped from the speeding coach with the girl

The Plains Scout

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

The cards were stacked against Dall Stockton when he was court-martialed out of the Army, but at track's end a new hand was dealt out for a rapid-fire gun-blazing showdown!

CHAPTER I

Crosstrails of Destiny

HE LEANED on his Sharps rifle, back braced against the red clapboards of the Union Pacific's new station, tall and austere and smacking of the military in spite of his plainsman's buckskins and coontail cap.

Aloof from the surging platform throng, Dall Stockton felt the ingrained contempt which buffalo men held for the blood-sucking parasites who followed the rails west. Standing there, the man pondered the strange vagaries of fate.

AN EXCITING FRONTIER NOVELET

Stick around Cheyenne long enough and you would run into anyone you ever knew, the saying went. That was why the buckskin man felt no particular surprise now, as his eyes followed Kent Longmeir working through the crowd.

Under different circumstances, these men would have shot first and asked questions later, in keeping with the leashed hatred that lay between them. A meeting like this could only have happened in Cheyenne, Stockton reflected when the first shock of recognition and stirred-up memories had spent itself.

Cheyenne was no longer end-of-track. But it had taken permanent root, was still the crossroads of the plains—a hell-roaring division point of the U.P.R., jammed with the motley, sordid cross-section of American life which the westering steel inevitably sucked in its wake.

Here on the platform now were the offscourings of humanity rubbing shoulders with silk-hatted Eastern capitalists and their parasoled ladies. Army troopers on leave from the fort at Laramie, jezebels of the dance halls, Indians of numerous local tribes, rock-eyed gamblers and adventurers and outlaws—they were all here. No, Kent Longmeir was not out of place in such an assemblage.

The rat-whiskered little man had jostled Dall Stockton's elbow in rounding the corner of the depot, had mumbled an apology without recognizing the buckskin man. Which was not surprising, considering the gulf of time and place and circumstance which had intervened since their last meeting.

DALL STOCKTON, the buffalo hunter with a winter's growth of curly russet beard crisp on his jaws, bore little resemblance to Captain Dall Stockton of the Union cavalry corps. Stockton had been spruce in gold braid and blue uniform three years ago, when he had faced Kent Longmeir and the staff officers of the court martial in General Sherman's H.Q. tent near Kennesaw Mountain.

It had been Corporal Kent Longmeir's testimony that had resulted in Stockton's conviction and ultimate humiliation, the stripping of his bars and rank, and dishonorable discharge from his country's service. Only lack of evidence had saved Dall Stockton from the rifles of a firing squad.

Stockton had drifted to the western frontier during the months that Longmeir accompanied Sherman's triumphant sweep from Atlanta to the sea. Yet destiny had brought them face to face here in a remote Wyoming boom town.

"Hee-yarr she comes! Yippeee!"

A stir ran through the waiting crowd as a lookout straddling the ridgepole of the depot announced the arrival of the special out of Omaha. The coming of trains from the East was not without its element of drama here in Cheyenne, for they were a tangible link with the civilization these frontier people had left behind.

Shouldering his heavy-barreled Sharps, Dall Stockton edged along with the shifting current of humanity, keeping Kent Longmeir's stoop-shouldered figure in view.

He wondered vaguely what business had brought the little ex-corporal this far west, wondered if Longmeir still traveled with the Union officer who had broken Stockton's career at the climax of the war.

A funnel-stacked locomotive snorted down the tracks with its furbished whistle spouting a plume of white steam and its bell clanging a warning to the bearded men who swarmed across the tracks to a vantage point on the opposite side.

The hot breath of the engine boiler stirred the rust-red hair combed in a thick mane over Stockton's ears, as the train ground to a halt alongside the Cheyenne platform.

Directly behind the cordwood-stacked tender was a windowless armored car fitted with loopholes for rifles. A Union Pacific paycar, Stockton recognized, loaded with specie to pay off the Irish paddies who were laying the tracks across the Wyoming wilderness to the northwest.

A single daycoach was coupled behind the paycar. Kent Longmeir moved out of the crowd which pressed down the platform to ogle the passengers alighting from the front and rear platforms of the coach—newcomers fresh from the States.

Stockton pressed in closer to Longmeir as the doors of the paycar trundled open and two guards, bristling with cartridge bandoliers and carrying Dragoon six-guns, peered out at the Cheyenne throng. Longmeir elbowed his way to the paycar door and handed a sheaf of papers to the guard in charge.

"We're rolling to end-of-track as soon as we change engines, Mister Longmeir!" the whiskered guard called down from the car

The Sharps thundered, and the raider fell

as he returned the papers after a brief examination of their contents. "You aim to ride in here with us?"

Stockton didn't catch Longmeir's reply as the little man stuffed his credentials inside his coat and spidered his way toward the coach. Curiosity needled the buffalo hunter. He caught the paycar guard's eye.

"Does Longmeir work for the U.P.?" he asked casually.

The bearded guard eyed the buckskin man with a cordial grin. U.P. employees were invariably friendly to the Sharps-packing plainsmen who kept the railroad supplied with fresh buffalo steaks.

"His papers say he's a clerk at the paymaster's office at end of track," the guard answered.

Stockton fingered his beard thoughtfully.

"You happen to know who the paymaster is?" he inquired. "I used to know this feller Longmeir. Campaigned with him just before the Rebs surrendered. He was an aide to a finance officer named—something that began with a B, I think."

The guard hunkered down in the car doorway, eager for conversation to break the monotony of the westward journey.

"Would it be Burdick? Alonzo Burdick?" he suggested. "Burdick's the paymaster at end-of-track. Seems I rec'lect he was an Army man before he come west with the Credit Mobilier."

A VEIN pumped fiercely on Stockton's temple. Major Alonzo Burdick had been the Army finance officer who had charged Dall Stockton with the robbery of an Army payroll wagon, in the tense days between the battles of Resaca and Dallas when the Confederate armies were crumbling before the Yankees in the Georgia campaign.

Alonzo Burdick had been responsible, along with Corporal Longmeir, his aide, for the disgrace which had nipped Stockton's Army career in the bud and had sent him west to forget and attempt to rebuild his shattered destiny.

"Burdick—that's the name!" Stockton said. "Knew him well. You say he's working for the U.P.R., eh?"

Stockton was pushed aside by a stationmaster bringing the two guards their coffee and biscuits. Directly ahead of him, Stockton saw Ken Longmeir waiting by the coach platform, leering at the young women passengers as they left the train.

In the act of tapping Longmeir on the shoulder, Stockton paused. The little ex-corporal had stepped forward, doffing his beaver hat to a young woman dressed in robin's egg blue who was just coming down the steps.

"You ain't—I beg your pardon, ma'am," Longmeir said, smirking at the girl. "I was about to ask you if you were Miss Lucinda Norton. But of course I'm mistaken."

Dall Stockton saw the girl's lips part in a spontaneous smile, her face taking on a new vitality as she stared at Longmeir.

"Why, yes—I *am* Miss Norton," she exclaimed. "Are you—a friend of my fiance's, perhaps?"

A strange agitation had seized Kent Longmeir.

"I—er—recognized you from the tintype Lonzo carries, Miss Lucy," he stammered. "Mr. Burdick ain't expecting you out at end-of-track for another month!"

Lucinda Norton's laugh carried music in it. She tucked a stray wisp of black hair under the modish little aigrette-feathered hat which overshadowed a neatly-piled coiffure.

"I had a chance to get aboard this Special while I was waiting in Omaha," she said, "so I thought I'd come out ahead of time and surprise Lonzo. We're to be married at end-of-track, you know."

The girl's words had a striking effect on Kent Longmeir. The color receded from his pinched features, turning his usual pallor to a greenish fishbelly hue.

"But you—you can't ride this train out of Cheyenne, ma'am!" he protested, gripping the girl by the wrist. "You've got to get off!"

Lucinda Norton eyed the little man with obcure amusement.

"And why should I? I understand fully that living conditions are primitive out here. Alonzo knows I'm willing to share his rough existence, in a tent if need be. Of course I'm leaving Cheyenne, Mr.—Mr.—"

Dall Stockton saw Longmeir gulp hard, shaking his head doggedly.

"But—it ain't safe, ma'am. The Sioux are riled up. They lay for small trains like this one that don't carry a troop escort. Burdick wouldn't think of permittin' you to enter Injun country without special protection."

The girl laughed again, a shiver of anticipatory thrill running through her slim body.

"Real honest-to-goodness red Indians?"

she said. "Why, that's terribly exciting. I wouldn't miss it for the world!"

Longmeir crowded up the steps beside the girl.

"Your baggage is in the coach?" he said. "I'll get it. I got to act in Lonzo's behalf, Miss Lucy. I'll find accommodations for you here in Cheyenne."

A frown gathered between the girl's brows. Before she could frame a reply, Longmeir had ducked inside the coach in search of her baggage.

LUCINDA NORTON found herself face to face with Dall Stockton. Her gaze ranged over the buckskin-clad hunter with the wide-eyed girlish interest of a tenderfoot seeing a picturesque Westerner against his own exotic background.

"I wouldn't let Kent Longmeir go off half-cocked and put you off this train, Miss," Stockton grinned. "He's wrong about the Indian danger. The Sioux aren't causing any trouble to the U.P. between here and end-of-track. I know. I just scouted that country and I didn't see a solitary redskin."

The girl's troubled eyes lost some of their annoyance.

"I don't intend to leave the train, sir," she answered. Then, tilting her head to study him, "Are you a friend of Alonzo's, too?" she asked eagerly.

A bitter grin tugged at the hunter's mouth.

"I knew your intended husband once," he admitted evasively. "We campaigned together back in '64."

She colored under the bold admiration in his eyes.

"I met Major Burdick when you Yankees requisitioned my father's home as an officer's billet," she said. "My friends in Tennessee didn't know what to think when I told them I was going to marry a damn-yankee after the war. But I haven't seen Lonzo for over two years. I can hardly wait to get to Medicine Butte."

Stockton grounded the butt of his Sharps and regarded the girl thoughtfully. She was young, not far past twenty, and even the austere lines of her traveling suit could not detract from the smooth curves of her supple figure.

Her soft speech, the modish tailoring of her costume, the good taste evident in the simple jewelry she wore, all bespoke inbred Southern gentility. Alonzo Burdick had chosen his bride from the ranks of Tennessee aristocracy, and the knowledge burned like gall in Dall Stockton, bringing with it a biting jealousy he was at a loss to comprehend.

Further conversation was interrupted by the appearance of Kent Longmeir in the coach door. The perspiring little man was struggling out onto the platform with a heavy leather portmanteau and a bandbox bearing Lucinda Norton's monogram.

"The lady isn't stopping off in Cheyenne, Longmeir," Stockton drawled. "You better hustle that luggage back where you found it, Corporal."

Longmeir's jaw sagged. His beady eyes shuttled over the buffalo hunter's face, muscles twitching his cheeks, eyes groping for recognition.

"But—it can't be!" he gasped finally. "Stockton! Captain Dall Stockton! I place you now!"

The buckskin man acknowledge the name with a grave bow.

"Ex-captain, thanks to you, Longmeir. Time was when you didn't have so much trouble recognizing my face."

With a choked oath, Longmeir whipped back his coattails and pulled a .41 derringer from his waistcoat. His hand was shaking as he aimed the stubby little muzzle at Stockton's head.

Lucinda Norton gave a startled cry, recoiling back against an iron grabrail. Except that the gravity of his face was replaced by a contemptuous grin, Stockton appeared to ignore the derringer in Longmeir's fist.

"Draw steel, Dall!" snarled the U.P. clerk. "Don't tell me you haven't tracked me down to kill me! No man can say I didn't give you a fair chance to draw."

CHAPTER II

Beyond the Laramie

THE girl from Tennessee stared as she saw Stockton turn his back to the gun-toter crouched on the coach platform. His humorous gray eyes met hers, and she mistook the cold lights flickering there as a sign of fear.

"Our friend Longmeir is dead set on you not taking this particular train to end-of-track, ma'am," he said, shouldering his buffalo rifle. "On second thought, maybe you

had better stop over in Cheyenne. Redskins aren't the only troublemakers between here and Medicine Butte."

The derringer in Longmeir's hand exploded deafeningly and Stockton whirled about in the act of moving into the crowd. He was in time to see a red-faced U.P. brakeman wresting the .41 from Longmeir's grasp, having come up on the clerk from behind. The bullet had shattered a signal lamp bracketed to the platform roof.

"Cool off, short and ugly!" warned the brakeman, thrusting the empty pistol in Longmeir's pocket. "You're li'ble to hurt somebody, dragging a shootin' iron in a crowd like this."

Longmeir jabbed a finger at Stockton's retreating form.

"That buckskinner's a killer! He's dangerous!" stormed the payclerk. "I knew him during the war. Ambushed a payroll courier. He was stripped of his rank and kicked out of the service. I tell you he's a killer!"

Lucinda Norton stared after the tall figure in buckskin until Stockton was lost in the crowd. The throng buffeted the girl as they closed in, the gunshot having drawn the curious. Lucinda Norton picked up her skirts and climbed the steps to the platform.

"Please carry my bags inside, Mister Longmeir!" she demanded coolly. "You're not putting me off this train. My ticket reads to Medicine Butte and that's where I intend to go."

Longmeir started to bluster, but the iron fingers of the brakeman closed like a vise over his shoulder.

"You heard what the lady said, bucko!" said the trainman. "Get those bags inside and get the heck off this train!"

Flushed and panting, Longmeir struggled back into the coach, followed by Lucinda Norton. When he had restored the bandbox and portmanteau to the brass-railed rack over her seat, Longmeir mopped sweat from his bony face and assumed a conciliatory attitude.

"I tell you we're heading into Indian country, Miss Lucy!" he implored the girl. "Mr. Burdick wouldn't want you to ride on a train that wasn't carrying troops—"

He broke off, seeing defeat in the firm resolution of the girl's chin.

"That—that hunter said the Sioux were not in this part of the territory," she rebuffed him. "I'll take his word for it."

Longmeir purpled.

"You'd believe that—that murderer? Believe me, Miss Lucy, that Stockton has a bad record. Your own fiance will tell you that. Lonzo helped court-martial Stockton back in Georgia."

The girl from Tennessee hitched herself about in the hard wicker seat and stared out the grimy window at the Cheyenne crowds, her attitude plainly one of dismissal.

With a frustrated groan, Longmeir made his way out of the coach. He paused on the steps, indecision and panic in his eyes. Then he hurried across the platform to the Overland Telegraph, whose wires had paced the steel rails of the Union Pacific on their march across the continent.

When he left the telegraph office five minutes later, Longmeir failed to notice the buckskin-clad hunter who moved away from the wall where he had been standing and entered the Overland office.

The telegrapher was busy at his sounder, transcribing a message coming in off the wire. On the pine table just inside the door was a pad of paper with a gold piece on top of it.

Dall Stockton pursed his lips thoughtfully as he turned the tablet around and scanned the message which Kent Longmeir had left for transmission.

ALONZO BURDICK, PAYMASTER,
CREDIT MOBILIER OFFICE,
MEDICINE BUTTE, WYOMING
LUCINDA NORTON ABOARD SPECIAL
LONGMEIR

STOCKTON looked up to meet the telegraph operator's outraged scowl. He picked up his rifle and stepped outside, eyes ranging up the tracks to where a relief engine was backing off a siding to couple onto the waiting paytrain.

Moved by a sudden impulse, the buffalo hunter joined the queue of passengers who were boarding the coach at Cheyenne.

"No more room aboard this train, soldier," the conductor told a blue-coated cavalryman immediately in front of Stockton. "Ticket holders only. You can hop a work train this afternoon or wait for the Laramie troop train in the morning."

Dall Stockton turned away, knuckles whitening on the barrel of his Sharps. He saw the two armed guards in the paycar pulling Kent Longmeir through the doorway. As a minor official of the U.P., Longmeir was

entitled to transportation to his office at end-of-track.

A portly drummer loaded down with bulging carpetbags elbowed past the buckskin man and paused to fumble through his pockets for a ticket. As he produced the pasteboard, Stockton dropped a hand on the drummer's tweed sleeve.

"Sell your ticket, pardner?"

The drummer scowled impatiently, putting the ticket between his fat lips and stooping to pick up his bags. Then he paused, his eyes bulging in their greasy hammocks of flesh as he saw the little stack of gold coins nested in Stockton's palm.

"I'll swap you these double eagles for that ticket, friend," the hunter offered. "I got urgent business at Medicine Butte. You can hop the work train this afternoon and make it to end-of-track."

The drummer's eyes lighted avariciously. He dropped his carpetbags and his pudgy hands virtually clawed the gold from Stockton's grasp.

"You've bought yourself a ducat, buckskin man!" he panted, handing over the ticket. "A hundred simoleons! Buffalo huntin' must be easy pay these days!"

The locomotive was under way when Dall Stockton swung aboard the rear platform. When Cheyenne was dropping behind in a swirl of smoke and cinders, a wry grin tugged at the hunter's lips. The gold he had parted with so casually had cost a grim toll of danger and hardship. He was not an independent hunter, but worked on contract for William F. Cody's string of wagons which supplied the U.P. tracklaying gangs with fresh meat.

He had been impelled to board this train on the slimmest of hunches, banking on suspicions he knew stemmed from his hatred of Longmeir and the U.P. paymaster who had ruined his Army career and robbed him of his good name.

On the other hand, a hundred dollars was cheap payment indeed for the opportunity of crossing Alonzo Burdick's trail again. Out here in Wyoming, divorced of the caste of Army rank, he would demand an accounting with his old enemy on ground of his own choosing.

Lurching his way down the aisle, Dall Stockton slid into an unoccupied seat alongside Lucinda Norton. The girl glanced up from a novel she was reading, recognized him, and scorn flashed hot in her eyes.

"You!" she said in a scathing undertone. "I'd think you'd be ashamed to have me lay eyes on you again—knowing that I know you for what you are!"

Dall Stockton braced his buffalo rifle between his knees and grinned sideways at the girl.

"Burdick wrote you about my trial, then?"

"He did. I remember all the details. You'd have been put to death if—if that courier you shot had died."

Anger flared in Stockton's face.

"I won't annoy you with my company, Miss Norton."

He left the seat and worked his way to the rear of the coach, finally seating himself on a pile of passengers' baggage.

As the afternoon waned, the stuffy atmosphere of the unventilated car dulled Stockton's senses. The coach was cloyed with the fumes of oil leaking from the ceiling lamps, and with the reek of whiskey and malodorous cigars which most of the male passengers were enjoying. Propping himself against an upended horsehide trunk, Dall Stockton slept.

NIGHT had fallen over the Wyoming wilderness when he was roused by the squeal of trucks around a tight hairpin curve and then a hollow rumbling told Stockton that the train was crossing the trestle which spanned the Laramie River.

Sometime before midnight, the chugging little train would pull into the boom camp of Medicine Butte, where a mushroom town had taken root at end-of-track.

Most of the passengers, including Lucinda Norton, were asleep. A card game was in progress at the far end of the coach, organized by a frock-coated tinhorn to fleece a quartet of bearded trappers out of their beaver pelt receipts.

Stockton got to his feet, stretching his stiff muscles. Cradling the buffalo gun under his arm, he wrenched open the rear door and stepped out on the platform, just as the train clattered off the Laramie trestle and started climbing a long grade to northward through rolling sage hills.

He pulled a corncob from his buckskin jacket and stoked it with tobacco and *kinikinik* bark. Moonlight gilded the long V of the rails behind the train, highlighting the new yellow crossties recently laid down over the roadbed ballast.

When he got his pipe going with flint and

steel, Stockton braced his rifle against the door casing, gripped the iron handrails over the platform steps, and leaned out to scan the country ahead, ghostly and beautiful in the argentine glow of a nearly full moon.

The wind tugged at his coontail cap, pulled at his beard. The yellow cone of the locomotive headlight picked out the rows of pealed telegraph poles, glinted off the looping nodes of wire which linked end-of-track with civilization. He wondered if Alonzo Burdick would be waiting at Medicine Butte's station when the train arrived, as a result of Longmeir's hasty telegram.

In the act of ducking back out of the wind, Stockton felt the little train lurch violently as the hoghead in the engine cab up front set his brakes. Sparks flew from screaming drivers and the train pistons slackened speed, drawbars thundering.

The pipe fell from the buffalo hunter's teeth as he saw the cause for this unscheduled stop in the heart of the barren Wyoming plain. A heap of brush and boulders blocked the roadbed ahead of the train, at the mouth of a narrow cut.

Stockton leaped back to seize his smoothbore Sharps as the train ground to a stop, the pull of gravity on the long upgrade being all that kept the cowcatcher from ramming the barricade. Simultaneously, the night went hideous with the screech of Indian war whoops.

Stockton leaped to the ground, buffalo rifle at his shoulder, as he saw two figures leap out of the brush flanking the right-of-way and swarm aboard the locomotive, moonlight flashing on tomahawk blades.

Two gunshots came from the interior of the armored car, but Stockton saw no spurt of flame or puff of gunsmoke from the car's ports. Before he had time to draw a bead on a feather-bonneted attacker who leaped back out of the engine cab, he heard a clank of metal as the coupling pin was pulled between the paycar and the coach. Another raider, approaching the train from the side opposite where Stockton had alighted, had uncoupled the passenger coach from the stalled paycar up front.

The Sharps thundered and the figure by the cab went down with a gagged scream. Hardly moving of his own volition, Dall Stockton leaped back aboard the coach platform as the car, freed of its coupling, started rolling backwards down the long grade.

Stockton dropped his rifle on the platform floor and swarmed up the iron ladder to the roof of the coach, heading for the brake wheel. Already the car had gathered an alarming rate of speed.

Trucks showered sparks from the curving tracks as the coach hurtled out of view of the locomotive. With frantic haste, Dall Stockton crawled out on the catwalk atop the jouncing coach and whirled the iron wheel which operated the car's manual brakes.

Even as he tugged the wheel to its last notch, the buffalo hunter realized that the brakeshoes were too worn and faulty to bring the runaway coach to a halt on this grade.

Ahead was the rickety trestle spanning the Laramie. And beyond that was the curve known to the U.P. tracklayers as the Laramie Hairpin. If the coach hit the Hairpin at even half its present speed, nothing could prevent its derailing and hurtling down the steep cutbanks of the river.

And the Laramie, swollen with floodwater at this season, was deep enough below the Hairpin tracks to drown every living soul aboard the doomed coach!

CHAPTER III
Massacre

DOGGING the rusty pawl of the brake wheel to its last notch without appreciably slowing the runaway car, Dall Stockton swung back down the side ladder to the platform.

Pandemonium met his eyes as he jerked open the coach door. Passengers were trampling each other in the blocked aisle, fighting toward the front door of the coach. Ceiling lamps swung in wide arcs from their hooks, shattering glass domes on the curved paneling. Men cursed. A woman screamed hysterically, peal on peal.

Lucinda Norton was struggling to extricate herself from under a pile of baggage toppled from the overhead rack when Stockton reached her seat. The girl cried out as she felt the buckskin man grab her arms and pull her to the aisle, then sweep her off her feet and head for the rear of the coach.

"Let me go—put me down—"

She was powerless in the arms of the big hunter. Bracing open the swaying door with

his buffalo rifle, Stockton ducked under the lintel and lurched out onto the platform, halting against the iron railing which overhung the blurring tracks.

Wind tore the aigrette-feathered hat from the girl's head. The coach wheels wailed around a bend and hit the west end of the Laramie trestle at better than a mile a minute.

"I hope you can swim, Lucy!"

Stockton was moving toward the left side steps as he shouted the words in her ear. Lucinda Norton was too stupefied with terror to utter a sound.

"We've got to dive for it," his shout reached her indistinctly above the rumble of iron wheels over the bridge. "Suck in a deep breath—"

The girl instinctively locked her arms around the buffalo hunter's neck as Stockton leaped off the bottommost step, flinging his body away from the speeding coach.

They hurtled past the protruding crossties and trestle beams with scant inches to spare. Stockton's arms drew the girl's head tight to his shoulder as they hit the muddy surface of the Laramie and went under with a geysering splash.

The icy current clawed their bodies as they sank, water pressure hammering their eardrums.

The careening passenger car had streaked to the far end of the trestle before their heads broke surface in a smother of spume. The current whipped them between massive log piers and carried them under the bridge into the open river.

Rip currents eddied the swimming buckskin man as he fought to break the girl's stranglehold on his throat and keep her head above water at the same time. He was vaguely aware of seeing the lighted windows of the speeding coach blurring against the background of the Wyoming hills as the car hit the Hairpin.

A cataclysmic crash of sound reached Stockton's ears above the rush of the freshet-swollen river. The coach lamps went dark as the car bounded off the tracks, upended, caromed sickeningly off a cutbank and hurtled end-over-end down a rocky declivity into the flooding river.

A powerful back-eddy carried the swimming hunter toward the far bank. A foam-laden wave caused by the impact of the U.P. daycoach curled and broke over their heads just as Stockton felt his moccasin soles ground on a jutting bar of shale.

He braced his legs, fighting for purchase against the tug of the current, getting his right arm under the girl's knees as he waded out of breast-deep water. Then he was dragging Lucinda Norton up on a marshy mud-bank, fifty yards downstream from the trestle.

Gagging muddy river water from her lungs, the girl lay gasping on the bank as Dall Stockton came to his feet, pulling the sopping coonskin cap from his head and beating it against his mud-smeared par-fleche leggings.

He looked around, coughing for breath. Midway to the trestle, a great scar was gouged from the sloping bank where the coach had tobogganed into the icy torrent of the Laramie.

Four shattered wheels of the car's rear truck lay in a bog of stunted salt cedars and pea-elm brush a few feet from the spot where Stockton had landed. Of the coach, only one splintered corner of the front roof loomed ominously above the surface of the sluicing river, well out from the bank, standing almost on end in the flooded channel.

[*Turn page*]

TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER

STOCKTON was blowing silt from the bore of his Dragoon pistol when Lucinda Norton propped herself to a sitting position in the weeds and stared about through a tangled mat of dripping hair.

"You're safe, Lucy," his voice reassured her gently. "Don't think about anything else."

He helped the Tennessee girl to her feet. She clawed hair out of her eyes and stared down at her soggy skirts, their dripping folds outlining her legs.

"The—the others?"

Stockton gestured toward the corner of the U.P. coach thrusting its wreckage above the river's crest.

"Drowned like trapped rats, ma'am. Nothing we can do to help them now."

In the moonlight, Lucinda Norton's face was bleached to the color of bone. She stared up at the big man in buckskins, shuddering to the chill wind which swept down the riverbed.

"Then you—I owe you my life. And after the way I—talked to you. Why?"

Stockton's shoulders lifted and fell under the dripping buckskin cape. He grinned bleakly, adjusting the wet cap on his head as he ran splayed fingers through his soaking mane of red hair.

"Suppose we don't try to figure that one out, Lucy. I don't know."

The girl crawled up the bank to seat herself on a boulder. She started to unbutton her waterlogged shoes. Dall Stockton busied himself with powder horn and fresh caps from the waterproof pouch on his elkhide belt, intent on reloading his Dragoon revolver. His cherished buffalo rifle had been left behind on the ill-fated coach when they jumped.

"That—that man who works for Lonzo—warned me not to take that train," she reminded him. "You see, you were wrong, Mr. Stockton. Indians did attack us. I saw them. From the car window—just before our coach started rolling backwards."

Stockton was swabbing out his gun holster with a tuft of dry grass as he clambered up the slope beside her. His wet face was etched with harsh lines as he stared off to the north.

Visible against the brush-tufted skyline was an ugly red glare, flames illuminating the underside of a rising column of thickening smoke.

"They looked like Indians," he conceded enigmatically.

Something in the man's tone caused the girl to pause in the act of emptying water from a shoe. Her eyes sought his, puzzled, questioning.

"They *were* Indians, weren't they?"

Dall Stockton sheathed his Colt and squatted to wring out his moccasins and relace his legging strings.

"We'd better get out on drier ground, Lucy. You'll catch pneumonia if we don't keep you moving."

He helped her gain the level of the railroad grade, forcing her to walk briskly into the teeth of a cold wind as they rounded the Hairpin. She avoided a backward glance at the submerged coach as they reached the trestle.

The red glow of the fire beyond the ridge had doubled now, shedding a malignant ruby glare into the heavens.

"They set fire to the train," Stockton grunted, as they headed across the plank catwalk between the trestle rails. "You can dry yourself out when we get there, at any rate."

The girl was forced to trot to keep up with the hunter's long-legged stride. She clung to his hand, showing no trace of her earlier resentment.

"But—won't the Indians scalp us?" she questioned anxiously. "Hadn't we better hide until daylight? Help will surely come from Medicine Butte when we don't show up."

He laughed shortly, withdrawn into his own thoughts.

"Train robbers don't tarry around," he said vaguely. "They had ponies stashed near the right of way. Don't worry yourself about getting that pretty hair lifted."

They came in sight of the blazing paytrain when they left the trestle and started toiling up the long, arrow-straight grade. Even at a quarter of a mile's distance, Dall Stockton saw that the locomotive tender's load of cordwood was blazing and that the flames had spread to the U.P. paycar behind it.

LUCINDA NORTON was staggering, near exhaustion by the time they reached the outer limits of the firelight. Smoke was boiling in tendrils through the exposed framework of the paycar roof. No sign of the train's attackers was visible around the wreckage.

"You keep behind these quakers while I reconnoiter, Lucy," the buckskin man or-

dered, steering the girl off the roadbed to a motte of aspens. "I'll come for you after I've scouted the layout up there."

Her hand clung to his arm as Stockton checked the loads in his Dragoon .45. Then, disengaging her fingers, the buffalo hunter headed up the right-of-way into the hot glare of the blazing paycar.

He kept close to the brush bordering the tracks, alert to dive for shelter at the first whizz of arrow or roar of gun. Circling wide to the left, he came abreast of the stalled locomotive and entered the railway cut, approaching the engine from behind the barricade which had halted it.

He saw no signs of life in the engine cab, smoldering now from the holocaust of embers in the ruined tender. The heat was intolerable to the naked flesh and Stockton paused behind the railroad obstacle to knot a wet bandanna about his face.

Then, gun palmed, he clambered over the barricade and skirted the drive wheels.

In the cab he found the twisted corpses of the fireman and engineer, killed at their posts. Tomahawk wounds were visible on the skulls of the enginemen, but they had not been scalped. Each body bristled with feather-tufted Sioux arrows.

"Since when," mused the hunter, "did Ogallala bucks quit lifting the hair of their victims?"

He crawled past the tender and approached the blazing paycar. Its sliding doors yawned wide open on both sides and smoke was billowing out in thick yellowish coils.

By the glare of the flames licking the varnished panels inside the armored car, Dall Stockton made out the crumpled bodies of the two guards. Like the engine crew, they had been riddled with arrows and a feather-hung tomahawk jutted from the pate of the guard Stockton had talked to in Cheyenne a few hours previously.

But Kent Longmeir's body was nowhere to be seen inside the car. The fact brought no particular surprise to Stockton. He had known with an inevitable prescience long before he reached the massacre scene that, somehow, Longmeir would have escaped the fate of the others.

He was remembering the two shots he had heard inside the car at the outset of the attack, and recalled that no puffs of smoke had issued from the loopholes which pierced the armored walls of the car.

"Longmeir could have murdered the two guards if he was expecting this holdup," Stockton mused, circling around behind the train to escape the heat. "He could count on the fire destroying the evidence."

THERE was plenty of Indian sign in the vicinity. Too much to ring true in Stockton's critical eyes. A beaded moccasin dropped from a warrior's foot in his getaway. The eagle-feathered bonnet by the locomotive cab, reminding Stockton of the attacker he had dropped with a slug from his buffalo gun. A blood-smeared trail where the dead man's comrades had carried away their single casualty. A yew-wood bow with a broken string, caught on a sage clump above the tracks.

Stockton made a double circuit of the flaming cars, satisfying himself that the surrounding terrain was deserted. Then he walked back down the tracks and summoned Lucinda Norton from her hiding place in the quaking aspen thicket.

"You can go around alongside the engine and get out of your wet clothes, Lucy," he told the girl. "Wring them out and spread them to dry. I'll be within calling distance, on the far side of the engine."

When the girl had vanished behind the smoking ruins, Dall Stockton worked his way up the northeast slope, scouting the area where the train's ambushers had crouched in waiting. There was moonlight enough to reveal the tracks of moccasined feet in the soft earth behind boulders and brush clumps overlooking the massacre scene.

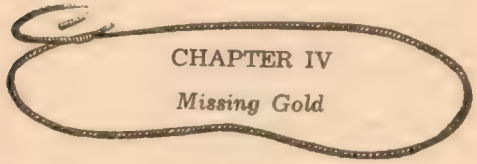
On the far side of the low ridge, Stockton came across a trampled area where iron-shod ponies had been tethered before the holdup. Only three horses had waited here. Three sets of tracks, both incoming and outgoing, led off to the north, toward the Laramie hills.

Stockton followed the trail of the escaping massacre party for a few yards, regretting the necessity of remaining close to Lucinda Norton. With a moon to guide him, a man with half of Stockton's trail savvy could follow the escaping trio with ease.

A glint of moonshine on a metal object in the dirt drew Stockton's eye as he was turning back toward the railroad. He stooped to pick up a tiny disk of tin, painted yellow on one side. The painted side of the disk bore a black anvil design and the legend, *Anvil Cut Plug.*

"The label off a hunk of tobacco," Stock-

ton muttered, loosening a horn-buttoned flap of his shirt pocket and stowing the piece of tin carefully within. "That's a new one on me—a Sioux buck who chaws white man's tobacco, and the most expensive brand to boot."



CHAPTER IV

Missing Gold

KENT LONGMEIR staggered into Medicine Butte long after midnight, to report a grim tale of tragedy to the commandant of the cavalry battalion which protected the U.P. spikers and graders against Indian attack.

Dawn was morrowing over the Wyoming wilderness when Longmeir returned to the scene of his hair-raising escape from Indian scalping knives, aboard a wrecking car which a Union Pacific locomotive had pushed down from Medicine Butte.

From a ridge overlooking the smoldering hulks of the paytrain, Dall Stockton and Lucinda Norton watched as a platoon of army troopers swarmed off the car, followed by Kent Longmeir and a number of railroad men from the machine shops at end-of-track.

"Lonzo! Oh, there's Lonzo!" the girl cried, coming to her feet as she recognized a tall figure in black steelpen coat and high beaver hat who emerged from the engine cab. The buckskin man at her side made no effort to halt the girl as she scrambled down the slope, calling her fiance's name.

Bitter memories crowded Stockton's mind as he riveted his gaze on Alonzo Burdick for the first time in three adventure-packed years. Always a swashbuckling dandy, the Union Pacific paymaster made as imposing a figure in mufti as he had in uniform. He wore his striped corduroys stuffed into highly-polished knee boots, and there was a glint of jewels on his maroon cravat.

Since leaving the Army, Burdick had grown a neatly-trimmed black imperial and he wore his sideburns long, almost brushing his white buckwing collar.

"Lucy! Thank God, darling—you were spared!"

Burdick ignored the staring troopers and U.P. machinists to climb over the barricade toward the oncoming girl. Dall Stockton averted his eyes as he saw the Credit Mobilier official fold Lucinda Norton in his arms.

Kent Longmeir's high-pitched voice dominated the confused scene alongside the smoking paycar. His face gaunt and besmeared with grime, his clothing bedraggled and ripped by thorns and brush, the pay clerk had clambered up onto the charred floor planking of the paycar.

"The gold is gone, just like I told you!" Longmeir was jabbering, leaping back to the roadbed to face the grim army troopers assembled there. "Those Injuns slaughtered the guards right in front of my eyes and made off with the U.P. payroll."

Dall Stockton slid down the cutbank and unobtrusively edged into the group of railroaders who were inspecting the ruins. He recognized their leader as Colonel Jeff Bailey, maintenance chief of the Medicine Butte division and another of Sherman's campaigners in the War Between the States.

"How does it happen," Colonel Bailey asked slowly, "that those redskins didn't lift your scalp durin' the excitement last night, Longmeir?"

The wizened little payroll clerk eyed the U.P. super in surprise.

"It was like I told you on the way down from the Butte," Longmeir said warily. "I hid behind a pile of mail sacks in the end of the car while the massacre was going on. Those redskins didn't pay no attention to the U.S. mail. They were after the payroll."

Bailey rubbed his jaw skeptically.

"How come these sliding doors are open?" he demanded. "They haven't been broken in. And they lock on the inside."

Longmeir had a ready answer. "That was the guards' fault, Colonel. When the train stopped, they slid open the far door yonder to have a look-see, thinking we must be at end-of-track. A reg'lar hail of arrows cut them down in their tracks. That was when I hid behind the mailbags."

"And you emerged from hiding," Bailey asked, "after the Indians had left?"

Longmeir nodded eagerly.

"I had to leave," he said. "Those red devils set fire to the cordwood in the tender. The paycar was burning by the time I dared to show myself in the open. I lit out for Medicine Butte to get help."

Alonzo Burdick had joined the group, one arm linked through Lucinda Norton's.

"The evidence is obvious here, Colonel,"

rasped the Credit Mobilier official. "I see no need to condemn my bookkeeper just because he happened to be returning to the Butte on this train, or because he left the scene of the robbery. After all—"

BURDICK broke off, as his heavy-browed glance came to rest on the tall man in buckskins who stood inconspicuously at the edge of the crowd. The color drained from Burdick's face as he met Dall Stockton's unblinking gaze.

"Captain Stockton!" gasped the paymaster. "Where in—"

"That's the hunter who saved my life, Lonzo!" Lucinda Norton spoke up eagerly. "He pulled me out of the coach and threw me into the river. If it hadn't been for Mr. Stockton I'd have drowned in the coach with all the others."

Stockton's eyes were narrowed as he moved closer to the staring paymaster. Old hatreds were being fanned into flame between these two ex-Army officers, a tension coursing between them like an electric current.

"It's a small world, Burdick," Stockton observed tritely. "Strange we should meet again under circumstances so parallel to those back at Kennesaw Mountain. Only this is one payroll robbery I have an alibi for."

Burdick flushed, shooting a sidewise glance at the girl beside him. He rubbed a knuckle over his pomaded mustache, hesitated, then extended a hand toward the buffalo hunter.

"I'm willing to let bygones be bygones, Stockton," he said huskily. "It appears I'm in your debt for saving my fiancée's life last night. I'll never forget that act of courage as long as I live."

Stockton ignored the proffered hand.

"Nothing's changed between me and you, Burdick. Nothing ever will be—until my record with the Army is clear again."

Colonel Bailey moved in between the glowering men as he sensed that both were on the verge of gunplay.

"What is this, Burdick?" the super demanded. "I didn't know you were acquainted with Dall Stockton."

Stockton turned to the old soldier who had come west to help General Lodge bridge an empire with steel.

"I boarded the paytrain at Cheyenne yesterday, Colonel. I happened to see the attack when it broke last night. One of the so-called Sioux uncoupled a coach and gravity carried it back to the Laramie trestle. It derailed at the Hairpin and plunged into the river, just as the attackers figured it would."

"The passengers?" Bailey's voice held a tragic note.

"No survivors except Miss Norton and myself, sir."

Bailey drew a long, slow breath.

"Why did you say 'so-called Sioux' just now, Stockton? Do you mean to imply this outrage wasn't committed by Indians?"

Stockton's gaze raked over the tense faces circled about him. He was staring at Kent Longmeir when he answered Bailey.

"I'd bet my last blue chip that no redskin was within fifty miles of this spot last night, Colonel. I think white renegades were responsible for this massacre."

There was a moment of shocked silence following Dall Stockton's bombshell. Then Alonzo Burdick cleared his throat angrily and stepped forward.

"Colonel Bailey, I wouldn't put too much confidence in this hunter's opinion. I happen to know he was dishonorably discharged from the Union Army in '64—under circumstances which the War Department still classifies as a miscarriage of justice. Stockton is no better than a common murderer."

The Union Pacific superintendent caught the whitening lines around Stockton's mouth. An old army campaigner of many decades standing, he was aware of the disgrace connected to a dishonorable discharge. A stern but practical man, Bailey likewise sensed the personal motive that had caused Burdick to thus reveal Stockton's secret.

"I'll thank you to keep out of this for the time being, Burdick!" the old man snapped. "No matter what Stockton's past record may be, I happen to know that he is one of Bill Cody's ace plainsmen. What grounds do you have to back your suspicions, Stockton?"

THE buffalo hunter paused. He was aware that Lucinda Norton's eyes had been fixed on him throughout the discussion. Kent Longmeir had drawn closer to Burdick, his face ashen.

"I'd rather talk to you in private, Colonel," he said.

Bailey withdrew down the tracks, accompanied by Stockton. The buffalo hunter took out the tin disk from a plug of expensive tobacco and explained the circumstances of

its discovery.

"Look at it this way, Colonel," Stockton said. "Sioux don't savvy U.P. gold. Firewater, yes. Guns and powder, yes. But Indians wouldn't hold up a train with the idea of chousing a gold shipment."

"I agree with you, Dall."

"No Indian I ever ran across," Stockton went on, "had the know-how to uncouple a railroad coach in order to get rid of potential defenders among the passengers, either. The whole setup is too pat for a sensible man to stomach."

JEFF BAILEY was silent, digesting Stockton's conclusions.

"Another thing—only three men pulled off this holdup," the buckskin man pointed out. "That's contrary to Sioux tactics. They attack in force. They lift scalps whenever they get the chance, which they didn't do in this case. They counted on not leaving any survivors alive, so I doubt if those three killers even took the trouble to dress like Indians. They shot their victims full of arrows and then left a war bonnet and a moccasin and a few other clues to make it look like an Indian job."

Colonel Bailey walked slowly back to the waiting men.

"Clear the tracks and hook onto this wreck, Pat," the super ordered his Irish foreman. "Lieutenant Jacobs, are any of your men skilled at trailing?"

The blue-coated cavalry officer shifted nervously under the colonel's stare.

"I—I'm afraid we're all new to the West, Colonel," Jacobs said.

"The attackers cut off to the north on horseback, sir," Dall Stockton spoke up. "Trailing them won't be difficult. And one of the three was dead, at that. I'd be glad to go along as the lieutenant's scout."

Colonel Bailey nodded approval.

"Get your horses off the flatcar, Lieutenant," the super ordered brusquely. "One of your men will have to ride back to Medicine Butte with us so that Stockton here can have his mount. I wish you luck, Stockton."

The buffalo hunter's arm snapped up in a salute, a military habit that seemed strange and unnatural now.

"Thanks, Colonel," he said. "If we're lucky we'll find where those riders buried their partner. If we find a grave I'll be able to verify my hunch."

CHAPTER V
End-of-Track Clue

ALONZO BURDICK knocked at the door of Colonel Jeff Bailey's office in Medicine Butte just as the sun was touching the western mountains that evening. He found the end-of-track superintendent poring over blueprinted plats of the surveys which General Lodge's engineers had run across the Continental Divide into the Green River country.

"Well?" The old military man looked up impatiently as Burdick closed the door. Friction had always existed between the men responsible for building the transcontinental railroad and the representatives of the vast Credit Mobilier joint-stock company which was financing the epical enterprise.

"The paddy gangs are back from end-of-track, Colonel," Burdick announced, taking a cheroot from his flowered waistcoat and biting off the tip. "Their tempers are ugly because this month's pay will be delayed. You know how those Irishmen are when they get liquored up."

Bailey laid down his T-square and scriber to eye the paymaster narrowly.

"So?" he prompted. "Do you blame them?"

"I suggest we put Medicine Butte under martial law until the workmen cool off tomorrow," Burdick said sullenly.

Colonel Bailey laced his gnarled fingers over an updrawn knee, making no move to invite Burdick to sit down. Open hostility blazed in his rheumy eyes.

"There's a lot of ugly talk going the rounds of the saloons and honkytonks," Bailey said. "The men don't believe Injuns robbed that train. They hold you responsible for the safe transit of their pay, Burdick. It will do no good to sic the soldiery on them or padlock the saloons tonight. It would only cause unwarranted rioting and bloodshed."

Burdick let blue smoke purl through his lips.

"After tomorrow," he announced with oily complacence, "I don't give a hang what those fellows feel about me. I'm taking the train to Omaha immediately after the padre marries us in the morning, Bailey."

Bailey's forehead corrugated with wrinkles. He was a man of few words, impatient

of the niceties of diplomacy. He spoke his mind now.

"That looks bad on the face of it, Burdick —your skipping out of Wyoming on the very heels of a major payroll robbery. Are you aware of the fact that this town knows you were the only person in Medicine Butte who had prior knowledge that a paytrain was scheduled to arrive this morning?"

Burdick's hooded orbs flashed malevolently. Reaching under the lapel of his steelpen coat, he drew out an envelope bearing the insignia of the Credit Mobilier, its flaps heavy with broken seals of red wax.

"Would you care to see my official orders, Colonel?" the paymaster asked smoothly. "Kent Longmeir has been appointed paymaster to succeed me. I am to report in two weeks for duty at the home office. I don't very much care how my departure looks to Medicine Butte."

Bailey waved the official document aside with an indifferent grunt.

"If you knew you were going to New York," he challenged, "how come Miss Norton made the trek all the way from Tennessee to this uncurried neck of Hades?"

Burdick grinned mockingly as he restored the Credit Mobilier orders to his pocket.

"Miss Norton's arrival was a surprise to me, Colonel. My letter informing her of my impending transfer passed her en route."

Colonel Bailey turned to his drafting board with a grunt of dismissal. Pausing at the door, Alonzo Burdick flicked ash from his cigar and inquired softly:

"Then you won't alert the military garrison to keep down disorders in town tonight?"

"I will not."

"Then," Burdick said indifferently, "I won't be responsible if your spikers and graders are too drunk to go to work in the morning. Good night, Colonel Bailey."

DALL STOCKTON was reining up a U. S.-branded cavalry stallion in front of the superintendent's office when Alonzo Burdick came down the steps. Burdick hesitated, then flipped back his coattails to reveal the Colt six-gun holstered at his hip.

"Any luck, Stockton?"

The buffalo hunter dismounted wearily, his face gaunt from a hard day in the saddle. Off through the dusk, a disconsolate platoon of troopers were heading for their barracks at the edge of town, failure written in the dejected slump of their bodies in saddle.

"Nothing to report, Burdick. Your payroll is probably gone for keeps."

Burdick headed off through the twilight. Stockton looped his reins over a hitching post and turned to see Colonel Jeff Bailey framed in the doorway of the maintenance shack.

Once inside, the colonel waved Stockton into a chair and went to a wall cabinet for whiskey and glasses.

"We followed the tracks from the railroad to a point on the west bank of the Laramie, about a dozen miles north," Stockton reported wearily. "They cut into the river to confuse their trail so I divided the soldiers into two squads and we moved up the east and west banks to the Oregon Trail crossing. Beyond that, tracking was impossible. A west-bound caravan had obliterated any tracks with the livestock they were driving."

The two men regarded each other intently over their drinks. Bailey recalled having seen a large train of Mormon prairie schooners pull into Medicine Butte late that afternoon. The train robbers, white or red, could have followed the Oregon Trail in either direction after leaving the river, waiting until they reached grassy country where they could scatter and meet at any one of a thousand rendezvous points to divide their loot.

"How about the man you tallied with your buffalo gun?"

"No grave," Stockton said. "They probably roped a boulder on the corpse and chucked the dead man into the river."

A bugle calling the troops to retreat formation over at the Army parade grounds cut through the silence which lay between the two men.

"You saw Burdick leaving the office as you came in," Bailey commented. "He's pulling stakes, Stockton. Credit Mobilier is transferring him to New York. He's leaving tomorrow as soon as he marries that Norton girl."

Dall Stockton's lips compressed at this news. Burdick must have known well in advance of his departure from end-of-track. If so, he could have engineered a fake Indian attack on the Union Pacific paytrain scheduled to reach Medicine Butte on the eve of his departure.

Bailey read the look in the hunter's eyes and nodded gravely.

"We haven't a grain of proof against Burdick or Longmeir," the oldster said. "Once

Burdick gets away from the frontier, any chance of pinning the guilt for that outrage on him will be gone forever. He could deposit his cut of the loot in some Eastern bank under an assumed name."

Stockton finished his whiskey with a gulp and got to his feet, hitching the thick belt at his waist.

"I saw a wagon train camped on the edge of town as I rode in tonight, Colonel," the buckskin man said. "I aim to mosey over there and have a talk with their trail scout. Chances are they saw those train robbers coming up the Laramie to their encampment last night."

Tugging on his coonskin cap, Stockton headed for the door. Bailey called him back.

"I don't want to pry into your personal affairs, Stockton," the old campaigner said tentatively, "but what's the trouble betwixt you and Lonzo Burdick?"

The buffalo hunter met Bailey's eye without wavering.

"It goes back to the Georgia campaign under Sherman, sir. An Army payroll courier was ambushed and his moneybags stolen. Kent Longmeir and Burdick claimed they saw me riding away from the area with the courier's pouches slung over my saddle. The money was never recovered, but between them they got me court martialed. I lost my commission. That's about the size of it, Colonel."

The grizzled old wardog tongued his cheek thoughtfully.

"I've never trusted Lonzo Burdick," he said. "The whole Credit Mobilier is a scandalous political graft, for my money. Keep me posted on developments, Stockton."

THE buffalo hunter stepped out into the indigo dusk, unhitched the warhorse which had been loaned him that morning by Lieutenant Jacobs, and spurred off toward the outskirts of Medicine Butte where a Salt Lake-bound wagon train was camped for the night.

He sensed the reckless tempo of life here in Medicine Butte as he headed up the main street. Technically at end-of-track, the U.P. tracks had actually been laid many miles beyond the boom town, but each evening the track gangs, burly Irishmen for the most part, returned to the Butte where their bunkshacks were located.

Ostensibly a railroad center, the U.P. sidings were ricked with untold thousands of crossties and flatcars laden with rails. Machine shops and turntables and a roundhouse gave the town its reason for existence.

But by far the majority of Medicine Butte's population were hangers-on who followed the westward march of the rails, preying off the free-spending construction workers.

Twenty or more saloons, built of unpainted clapboards bolted together in sections for speedy dismantlement and erection each time the end-of-track settlement frog-hopped toward the Rockies, were spaced at intervals along the main stem.

Gamblers operated all-night games in tents and cabins, soddies and frame boxes. The big Iron Horse hotel, canvas-roofed and occupying an entire city block, catered to Eastern tenderfeet, with livery barns selling wild prairie hay at exorbitant prices to such townsmen as owned stock.

Mercantile stores, saddle shops, blacksmith's forges, the honky-tonks and sporting houses where the red lights twinkled—all were here, catering to the appetites and whims and lusts of the end-of-track legion, just as they had at Laramie and Cheyenne and North Platte.

Lawlessness was rampant here on the frontier outpost and guns were worn as casually as hats or coats. Stockton sensed a growing tension in Medicine Butte tonight, and guessed its reason. The thousands of U.P. workmen, counting on regular pay to meet their gambling and other bills, would not be patient with paycar robberies back down the line.

Passing the parade ground and barrack tents where the army was garrisoned, Stockton dismounted outside a squared circle of canvas-hooded Conestogas parked tongue-to-tailgate around a campground.

Emigrant families were assembled around a communal fire inside the square of wagons, as they did in the open plains where the danger of Indian attack was ever present. Even in the safety of Medicine Butte, the wagon train had followed its custom through ingrained habit.

The Mormons were lifting their voices in hymn-singing to the accompaniment of a portable organ and numerous banjos. Dall Stockton waited for a break in the singing before he approached a shaggy figure on the outskirts of the crowd, whom he took to be one of the overland trail scouts.

Instead, Stockton learned that he had

picked out the captain in charge of the train.

"You camped on the west bank of the Laramie last night, didn't you?" Stockton inquired.

"We did," answered the wagonmaster tersely, in the brusque manner of Mormon elders.

"Did your nighthawks happen to flush any riders coming up the river from the south—say around midnight?"

"Aye, that we did," replied the wagoneer. "Two redskins. Scouts for a war party, we figgered."

STOCKTON'S heart quickened its tempo. His hunch had been more fruitful than he had dared hope.

"Those Indians," he said, "robbed and burned a U.P. train farther down the river last night. Could you tell me what direction they headed after they sighted your camp?"

The Latter-Day Saint muttered a pious platitude.

"Aye, that I can, stranger. They left the river below our camp and headed west along the Overland. I kept the train alerted till daylight, in case they returned with a bunch of warriors and tried to run off our stock."

Stockton thanked the emigrant and returned to his horse. Last night's train robbers, then, had pushed west toward Medicine Butte. Somewhere along the route they might have disposed of the leathern sacks of Union Pacific specie. Or, if they were white renegades from rail's end, as Stockton believed them to be, in all probability they had returned to Medicine Butte under cover of darkness, bringing their loot with them.

Stockton stabled his horse at the army post and returned to the main street. He headed for the Iron Horse Hotel, on the assumption that Lucinda Norton probably had a room reserved there and, in that event, Alonzo Burdick would probably spend the evening before his marriage somewhere on the premises.

Buffalo hunters in buckskins and coon caps were out of place in a hostelry catering to wealthy visitors from the East, but Stockton ignored a frowning headwaiter and went into the crowded Iron Horse dining salon.

Choosing an obscure corner table, he ordered the first meal he had had since yesterday, overcoming a supercilious waiter's disdain by a display of gold coin.

While waiting for his order to arrive, Stockton scanned the other diners in the crowded hall. His eye was drawn to a central table under a massive crystal chandelier. Covered with imported damask, it glittered with silver and glassware.

The buckskinner's lip curled as he saw that Alonzo Burdick, immaculate in formal dress, was presiding at the table. At his side, Lucinda Norton was being given a pre-nuptial toast by the guests, local petty officials of the Credit Mobilier, including Kent Longmeir.

The girl was wearing a low-cut satin gown and her high-piled hair was caught in place with a jeweled coronet. She looked regal tonight, a queen receiving the homage of her court.

Dall Stockton, remembering their plunge into the Laramie River the night before, when the democracy of imminent death had narrowed the social gulf between them, reflected that Lucinda Norton deserved better than she was getting.

CHAPTER VI
Hunter's Vigil

BURDICK'S gala pre-wedding party was reaching the champagne and cigar stage when Stockton finished his meal. The buckskin man paid a king's ransom for the privilege of eating in end-of-track's most elite establishment, and made his way out to the lobby.

Another gold coin netted him the information from the room clerk that Alonzo Burdick was a permanent guest at the Iron Horse, reserving Room F on the second story each time the hotel moved westward to follow the probing vanguard of the Union Pacific.

Lucinda Norton had been assigned a room on the ground floor. The hotel clerk added proudly that the wedding would be staged tomorrow in the ornate lobby of the Iron Horse.

"How about the new paymaster, Kent Longmeir?" Stockton inquired, spinning another gold piece on the clerk's desk. "Does he bunk here at the Iron Horse?"

The clerk slid the coin into his palm under the counter top and informed Stockton with a disdainful nose-wrinkle that common book-

keepers could not afford to room at the Iron Horse.

"Longmeir's got himself a shack out beyond the U.P. roundhouse," the hotel clerk said. "Under a big lodgepole pine tree, I believe."

The buckskin man fished in his pocket for his depleted money pouch.

"I aim to spend the night here," he said. "I want an upstairs room, and forget the price. My name's—Sherman."

Money overcame most social barriers at end-of-track, and in a few minutes Dall Stockton was inspecting a tiny cubicle on the second floor, barely large enough to contain a straw-ticked cot. The lodgings had cost him fifty dollars cash on the barrelhead.

Sometime before the night was over, Stockton believed that Alonzo Burdick would be contacted by one or more men, including Kent Longmeir, on surreptitious business connected with last night's robbery of the U.P paytrain. If so, Stockton aimed to know when that rendezvous occurred.

Stretching out on the cot, the buffalo hunter permitted himself a much-needed sleep. He was counting on the instinct gained through long years on army bivouacs to awaken him at midnight or shortly thereafter, an ability to control his slumber which subsequent years on the plains had served to sharpen.

When he roused, immeasurably refreshed, Stockton opened his window shutter and consulted his watch by moonlight. It was twelve-forty-five. Any time now, he reasoned, Burdick's celebration would be winding up.

He went to the door and peered out. His room was at the end of a hallway, flanked on either side by doors identified by letters of the alphabet. Room F, occupied by Alonzo Burdick, was the sixth door on the left from his room.

A bar of lamplight gleamed through the crack under Burdick's door. Shadows passing between the door and the lamp made Dall Stockton wonder if the paymaster's meeting with his henchmen was already taking place.

"On the other hand, the bridegroom is probably packing up for his trip east," muttered Stockton. "He'd wait for the hotel to quiet down for the night before he got down to business."

Stockton left his door open a tiny crack and wedged it there with a stub of tallow candle. Then he hauled his cot away from the window and sat down in the darkness, where he could keep vigil on Room F.

At one o'clock the lamp went out in Burdick's room. The windows of Room F opened on the main street, precluding any likelihood of the U.P. paymaster receiving secret visitors from that direction.

Hours dragged, but Dall Stockton maintained his watch with a frontiersman's resolute patience. Latecomers, drunk for the most part, lurched down the hallway to their respective rooms between two and three o'clock, and the hotel quieted.

Outside on the main street, Medicine Butte's saloons and hurdygurdy houses were reaching the noisy climax of their night's business. Gunfire broke the night revelry at infrequent intervals, as night owls worked off their alcoholic exuberance. Medicine Butte was as busy, here before the dawn, as it had been at midday. Sin knew no season at end-of-track.

A CLOCK down in the deserted lobby was chiming four when the buffalo hunter's vigil was rewarded, but not in the manner he had been expecting.

He saw the door of Room F open and Alonzo Burdick, fully dressed, stepped out into the hallway, silhouetted against the feeble glow of an oil lamp in a sconce at the head of the lobby staircase.

Glancing up and down the corridor, the U.P. paymaster hitched his Prince Albert snug to his shoulders and tiptoed toward the opposite end of the hall from Stockton's room.

Sucking a breath across his teeth, the buckskin man came to his feet as he saw Burdick pass the head of the stairs and continue on to a fire-escape door which opened on an exterior stairway.

When the door closed behind Burdick, Dall Stockton slipped out of his room and hurried past the bedroom doors, his doeskin moccasins making no sound on the burlap carpeting.

Reaching the fire-escape, Stockton eased the door open in time to see Alonzo Burdick stride briskly into an alley flanking the Iron Horse annex. Loosening his gun in holster, Stockton followed the steps to the ground level. He moved swiftly down the alley, cougar-silent, treading on the balls of his feet with the swift litheness of a trained hunter stalking his prey.

At the far end of the alley, Stockton saw the U.P. paymaster remove the lid from a rain barrel and reach an arm inside. He lifted a dripping, weighty object from the barrel and hoisted it to his shoulder before emerging into the open moonlight of a back street.

Stockton dropped face-down in the clotted shadows as he saw Burdick glance around behind him, then cross the Union Pacific tracks and vanish behind a long rick of crossties stacked beside a spur track.

Hemmed in by piled crossties, Burdick would have to follow the sidetrack past the U.P. roundhouse. Stockton crouched low and moved at a run across the side street, following a row of flatcars loaded with rails and fishplates, paralleling Burdick's route.

Where the string of cars ended at a bumper formed of a mound of earth, Stockton paused with gun palmed, eyes questing the moonlit expanse of open ground ahead. He saw Burdick, carrying the water barrel burden in his arms now, move at a fast walk toward a shanty built under a towering lodgepole pine.

"Longmeir's place," Stockton whispered to himself.

CHAPTER VII
Sunrise Retribution

KENT LONGMEIR roused from sleep as a knock sounded on the slabs of his leather-hinged door.

Kicking back his soogans, the U.P. clerk fumbled under his pillow for a gun.

"Who is it?" he demanded harshly.

"Burdick. I've got to see you, Kent."

Longmeir thrust his feet into slippers and went to the door, sliding the hickory bolt out of its socket and admitting the Credit Mobilier man.

"Check your window blinds and light a candle," Burdick ordered. "I want to be back at the hotel before daylight shows. I've got some last-minute arrangements to talk over with you."

Steel spat sparks from a flint in Longmeir's skinny fist to ignite the wick of a railroad lantern on a table. Burdick unloaded a bulging U.P. pouch on the table, its contents making a metallic chinking sound.

"Your divvy!" Longmeir whispered. "Mort Segrum an' me got our share buried in a garbage dump out beyond the pine tree."

Burdick sat down on a split-pole stool and took a gold case from his vest pocket. From it he took a square of Black Anvil chewing tobacco and pared off a quid with a penknife which dangled from his gold-nugget watch chain.

"I'm leaving my share with you for the time being, Kent," Burdick said soberly. "Stockton's talked Colonel Bailey into being outright suspicious of me. The odds are that Lucy's and my baggage will be impounded and searched before we get to Omaha. I can't risk being caught with any specie."

Longmeir nodded, his face a shadowy skull in the lantern light.

"Glad to help out, chief."

"I'll send you word when I want my cut shipped east," Burdick went on, tucking his tobacco into his cheek. "I should be ready before Medicine Butte pulls stakes and heads west. I'll have you ship it in a sealed Credit Mobilier parcel so the inspectors won't molest it, and you can consign it to an assumed name I'll send along later."

Longmeir chuckled harshly.

"I aim to settle Dall Stockton's chips if he sticks around the Butte," the clerk promised. "If he hadn't stuck his horns into the deal, U.P. would have writ off the whole business as a Sioux raid."

Burdick stood up and extended a hand.

"I'll see you at the wedding in the morning, Kent. We've got to admit that I wouldn't be getting married if it hadn't been for Stockton."

Longmeir unlocked the door and stood back as Alonzo Burdick stepped out into the night. He halted on the threshold, blocked there by a towering figure in buckskins who reamed a Dragoon .45 sight-deep into Burdick's body.

"Back up, Lonzo. We're having a little pow-wow." Dall Stockton shoved Burdick back into the shack and kicked the door shut, his gun barrel weaving over to cover Longmeir. "Personally, I doubt if that wedding comes off."

With a choked oath, Longmeir whirled and lunged toward the lamp on the table. The motion was checked by a .45 slug ripping through the bone and sinew of his thin wrist.

Timed with Longmeir's squall of agony. Alonzo Burdick slapped a hand under his coat lapel and brought a silver-plated re-

volver into the open. He jerked trigger at point-blank range, but his bullet ripped a slot through the flimsy wall behind Stockton. Before Burdick could correct his line of fire, Stockton tripped gunhammer a second time.

Chopped down by a slug which caught him dead center to the heart, Alonzo Burdick sprawled across the table, eyes staring sightlessly at the flickering lantern, his life-blood splashing out over the bullhide specie case.

Moving forward through milky layers of gunsmoke, the grim-faced buffalo hunter pulled the sack of gold from under Burdick's corpse. Then he reached out to hook his gun muzzle under the curved ivory stock of the pistol in Longmeir's nightshirt pocket, flipping it to the earthen floor.

"All right, Corporal!" Stockton ordered. "Let's go. We can patch up that wrist of yours over at Colonel Bailey's."

DAWN was flaming in the east when Dall Stockton's rapping gun butt summoned Jeff Bailey out of his sleeping quarters. Clad in nightshirt and with sleep still sticky in his eyes, the superintendent fired a lamp-wick and opened the door to see the buffalo hunter ushering the whimpering figure of Kent Longmeir into the bedroom at gun's point.

"Longmeir knows he faces a firin' squad for the murder of those two payroll guards, Colonel," Stockton remarked, tossing Burdick's heavy bag of loot on the floor. "So he's decided to do a little talking in the hopes of drawing a life sentence instead. Go ahead and speak your piece, Longmeir."

The Credit Mobilier clerk, clutching his bullet-smashed wrist, stared at the floor and swallowed hard.

"It was—Burdick's scheme from the beginning," whined the bookkeeper. "He knew he was bein' transferred east and he figured a fake Injun raid would net him a good haul from this month's U.P. payroll. My job—was to handle the guards inside the paycar when him and Mort Segrum an' Timothy O'Grady stopped the train. But I didn't kill them guards, Colonel. I just knocked 'em out with a stove poker. I swear it!"

Colonel Bailey laughed harshly.

"Very interesting," he said. "Go on."

"I—I telegraphed Burdick from Cheyenne that his girl would be on that train," the clerk whimpered. "I thought that would make him call off the deal—seein' as how we—he planned to uncouple the coach and let it slide back down the grade to the river. But he wanted the gold—more than Miss Lucy. It was Burdick who uncoupled that daycoach."

"Knowin' that sweet girl was on board!" gasped Bailey incredulously. "He was a blacker scoundrel than even I gave him credit for."

Longmeir shrugged hopelessly.

"The Injun business went over without a hitch," he said. "Stockton plugged O'Grady and we dumped him in the river on our way back to Butte. I can show you where Mort Segrum an' I cached our divvy."

Dall Stockton, seated on the colonel's rumpled bed with his gun covering the bayed renegade, grinned crookedly.

"We'll round up Segrum later," he said. "But you're not through yet, Longmeir. I want a qualified Army veteran to hear what you've got to say about my court martial."

Longmeir's eyes rolled in their sockets, desperation turning his narrow face a sickly yellow.

"It was Burdick—who ambushed that payroll courier—durin' the Kennesaw Mountain campaign in '64," Longmeir confessed frantically. "He bribed me—to perjure myself at Stockton's court martial."

Jeff Bailey glanced triumphantly at the buckskin man.

"That's enough," said the old campaigner. "I'll see that this confession reaches the proper authorities back in Washington, Stockton."

THE Overland Telegraph accomplished its miracle of abolishing time and distance and within the week Dall Stockton presented himself at Colonel Bailey's office in Medicine Butte, his buckskins replaced by the blue of a military uniform. A repentant War Department had restored Dall Stockton to his former standing in the service and had replaced his captaincy with the field grade rank of cavalry corps major, authorizing the promotion with the signature of his commander-in-chief, President Andrew Johnson.

"Colonel, I just got word that Kent Longmeir hung himself at the Cheyenne jail where he was awaiting trial," Stockton said excitedly. "He knew the—"

Stockton broke off as he saw a girl working at the desk beyond Bailey's.

"Miss Norton!" he exclaimed. "I thought

—that is, I supposed you'd gone back to Tennessee."

Lucinda Norton crossed the room to stand before him, her eyes proud and shining and untouched by any trace of grief.

"I want to follow the U.P.R. to the very Pacific, Major Stockton," she told him earnestly. "Colonel Bailey has hired me as his clerical assistant."

"But—but," the soldier stammered confusedly. "After all that happened—"

Lucinda Norton's eyes clouded momentarily.

"I was told—how my fiance signed my death warrant on my wedding eve, Major," she told him huskily. "A girl of eighteen has silly romantic notions, I guess. Back in Tennessee during the war, it was—well, the thing to do, to fall in love with a uniform."

Colonel Jeff Bailey chuckled paternally in the background.

"Major Stockton is in command of the battalion that's covering our railroad building, Lucy," the oldster chuckled. "Don't let that fancy new outfit of his prejudice you, because you two are going to see a lot of each other from here on out, lass."

Dall Stockton reached out impulsively to cover the girl's slim hands between his own calloused palms.

"Lucy and I got acquainted," he told the colonel, "when I was a common buffalo hunter dressed in buckskins. And I aim to convince her that clothes don't make the man, Colonel."

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COMING NEXT ISSUE

HIS OWN DEATH WARRANT

An Action Novelet of the Southwest

By NELS LEROY JORGENSEN

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Judy opened the toll gate to let the rider through

Lonely Road

By L. P. HOLMES

Many strangers passed over the toll bridge—some bound for trouble—but Judy didn't expect Cupid to come passing by!

AT WORK IN the garden patch on the warm, black soil below the spring house, Judy Rawlings heard the thump of jogging hoofs which told of a rider coming in along the north approach to the toll gate. She dropped her hoe and with a free, swinging step full of youth and unconscious grace, went down past the sprawling cabin.

She was a slim, willowy girl, with a wealth of dark brown hair hanging free over her shoulders. Her brown eyes were clear and

direct, but far back in their limpid depths lay a steady shadow of discontent, and there was just a hint of sullenness about the soft crimson of her mouth. She came up on one side of the toll gate just as the rider reined to a halt on the other.

By and large, Judy had little use for cowboys. She had seen her share of them come over the toll road. They came up out of House Rock Valley with shipping herds bound for Pinnacle Junction, sixty miles across the mountains to the north. Riders for Hec Travis' Diamond H T and Jeff Cannod's Hogpen outfits. They were a wild, rough, unruly lot and were always pulling wisecracks for Judy's benefit.

Coming back from Pinnacle Junction, after delivering the cattle to the shipping pens there, the men were even worse—half drunk, loud and profane. Judy hated to see them come through, even as she hated Hec Travis for his hard, bullying, grasping meanness, and Jeff Cannod for the way he looked at her with his bold, black, predatory eyes, his big-toothed grin and the oily mealiness of his words and manner toward her.

Then there were other riders who drifted through, men who rode alone, silent, tight-lipped, wary and wild as prowling timber wolves. Almost invariably these men wore two guns, tied down, and they always seemed to be listening and watching. As a rule this kind of rider paid Judy little attention, though one or two of them had looked at her with a peculiar, chilling avidness.

With a glance, Judy had this new rider all catalogued. He wore two big Colt guns strapped low against his jean clad thighs. The dust of long travel lay thick on him and his horse. He was alert and watchful. But his eyes, when he glanced down at her, were clear and gray and puckered with a slight twinkle, and his smile was quick and bright.

"Nice mornin', miss," he drawled easily. "How much I got to pungle up to get you to swing that toll gate open?"

"Horse and rider—twenty-five cents," answered Judy mechanically.

He thumbed a pocket of his worn liver and white calfskin vest, brought out a silver dollar. "You can keep it all if you'll throw in a cup of coffee and a plate of bacon and eggs. Seems the egg business is good." His smile widened as he nodded toward Judy's chicken pen where a hen cackled proudly.

Judy hesitated. Had her Uncle Spade or old Josh Abbott, man of all work, been around, she might have agreed. But they were off down the south reach of the road somewhere, clearing away a small slide. And Uncle Spade had given her strict orders never to feed anyone unless he or Josh Abbott were on hand. Except, of course, Hec Travis and Jeff Cannod, who seemed to be especially privileged as far as Uncle Spade was concerned.

Judy shook her dark head. "Sorry. We don't feed strangers, even for money."

"'Fraid of that," sighed the rider, pocketing the dollar and producing a quarter which he flipped down to Judy. But his smile worked again and without resentment. "Reckon a man can get used to bein' hungry, providin' he don't starve to death entirely. Just the same, a cigarette for a meal, three times hand runnin', gets a little tiresome. How much farther do I have to travel before I can buy a meal?"

"Beegum, I guess, down in House Rock Valley," answered Judy. But she was thinking, as she put her slim weight against the toll gate, that Beegum was close to thirty miles along, which meant almost another full day of riding before this man could eat again.

ONCE started, the toll gate swung easily enough. It was a single pole, a long, graceful fir, pivoting on a heavy iron bar driven deep into the flat top of a stump. On the heavy end beyond the stump was a wooden cradle, filled with rocks, which cleverly balanced the whole.

The rider reined his horse through and over to the dripping, moss-covered watering trough which stood under the big sugar pine before the cabin. The trough was fed by a pipe coming down from the spring house, and water tinkled into it day and night. Stepping out of his saddle, the man cupped a hand under the open pipe and drank thirstily while his horse, plunging its nose deep into the trough, drank with him.

The rider straightened up, pushed his hat back and reached for the makings. Closer survey showed Judy that he was young and rather handsome. Under his tipped back hat his hair was yellow and thick and boyishly tousled.

Just then over in the chicken coop, that dratted hen cackled the announcement of another egg, freshly laid.

"Do you really mean you haven't had anything to eat since breakfast, yesterday?"

asked Judy reluctantly.

"That's right," he announced cheerfully. "Wish that hen would quit tellin' me all about nice fresh eggs. How far to this here town of Beegum?"

"Too far," said Judy in sudden decision. "I guess it won't hurt to break a rule once in a while. I'll get you some breakfast."

With a swift twitch of his brown hand, the rider flipped the freshly rolled cigarette aside and his smile became a broad grin. "Lady, you're wonderful! The angels will bless you, and the little birds in the tall pine trees will sing songs for you. Me, Lute Curry, I'll remember you in my prayers."

Judy laughed with him. She couldn't help it. There was a bright infectiousness about this rider such as she had never seen before. Not once had he scowled or snarled or acted fresh. He was, despite those two big guns he carried, just—nice.

Judy ran for the cabin door. "I'll be as fast as I can," she called back. "And there is a full oat bin in the stable yonder. Your horse could probably stand some breakfast, too."

Through the open kitchen window, she heard him talking to his horse as he led the animal over toward the stable. "Stinger, our luck has surely changed. Oats for you, bacon and eggs and coffee for me. That there is the finest, prettiest little lady you and me ever met up with. We'll sure thank her gentle when we leave."

All of which caused Judy to make four eggs instead of two, a whole pan full of bacon and a fresh pot of coffee. There was half a pan of biscuits left over from breakfast and she put these in the oven to warm. And she brought out a jar of her best wild grape jelly. She saw him scrub up at the watering trough, drying face and hands on his neckerchief. Then he was lounging in the kitchen door, lean and tall and wide of shoulder.

"Don't blame me for hanging around close," he said plaintively. "Smell of that grub has got me droolin' like a bear at a honey tree."

"You're just in time," Judy told him. "Sit up and eat."

He ate slowly, even though Judy could see his hands shake slightly as he lifted the first few forkfuls to his lips. Judy got a queer, tight feeling in her throat, for she had come within an ace of sending him on without food. Uncle Spade would be hopping mad when she told him about this, but she didn't care.

"If that isn't enough, I'll cook you some more," she said stoutly.

His eyes twinkled at her. "I'm pretty wolfish, but not that hollow. You're great, this is great, the whole world's great!"

He finished finally, every plate wiped clean. Putting two silver dollars on the table he said, "Worth that and more. Finest meal I ever ate, positively."

Judy picked up one of the dollars, went over to the money box to make change. "Fifty cents is the regular charge. I won't take a cent more."

Through the open window her quick ear caught the creak and grind of wheels, the clump of hoofs. She took a look and saw Uncle Spade and Josh Abbott coming in on the work wagon. Riding along beside them were Hec Travis and Jeff Cannod.

Uncle Spade was, as Judy feared, furious. She saw him staring at Lute Curry's horse as it munched its feed of oats. Then he swung his dark bearded face toward the cabin and came striding swiftly over. Hec Travis and Jeff Cannod came with him.

"Don't mind Uncle Spade being angry," Judy said, turning to Lute Curry a little nervously. "I'll make him understand."

Curry, his lean head cocked slightly as he listened to the clump of approaching boots, smiled reassuringly. "No cause for anybody to be mad about anything that I can see."

Uncle Spade and the others came pushing through the door, and Judy saw their glances whip measuringly to the stranger. Then Uncle Spade whirled on Judy.

"Thought you had strict orders about this sort of thing, girl," he growled. "This feller make you get him some grub or did you do it of your own free will?"

JUDY was quaking inside, but she faced her uncle stoutly. However, before she could answer, Lute Curry spoke in his easy, cheerful way.

"I asked if I could buy a meal, sir, seeing as how I hadn't eaten since this time yesterday," he said. "The little lady took pity on me. What's wrong about that?"

"She's had her orders about such things and I don't give orders just to hear myself talk," rapped Spade Rawlings. "Her and me, we'll have a little understanding about this later. Right now, who are you and what's your business?"

"That's right," put in Hec Travis in his harsh, raspy way. "Name yourself and where you're heading."

The yellow-haired rider had pushed his chair back and was now building a cigarette. He was still smiling, but his gray eyes had gone a little smoky, which darkened them.

"As a rule," he drawled, "I consider the answers to that strictly my business and none at all of any jigger full of bully-puss that comes pushing along. Yet, just to make things right by her—" he nodded at Judy—"I'll say the name is Lute Curry and I'm heading for this here House Rock Valley. Satisfied?"

"What's your business in House Rock Valley?" persisted Hec Travis.

"Mebbe to take a look at the rock that looks like a house. That's aplenty. Keep the rest of your questions for the hooty owls."

Jeff Cannod had been silent up to now, his bold, black eyes alternately watching Judy and the yellow-haired rider. And as he saw how Judy hung on Lute Curry's words, his own lips twisted in swift anger.

"I got some questions of my own," he blurted. "And you'll answer them or—"

"Or what?" Curry was out of his chair and facing Jeff Cannod, moving in on him, his manner deadly bright. "Or what?"

The words were like little jabs of taunting, challenging steel and Jeff Cannod unconsciously backed up a stride or two, his swart face black with baffled, sullen anger. For a moment the boldness of his eyes flickered and gave way to something else, which Lute Curry saw and read with a little laugh.

"Or nothing," the yellow-haired rider said, almost contemptuously.

He turned his back on Jeff Cannod, moved to the door. There he paused to look at Spade Rawlings.

"Mister, if you're full of mad you got to get rid of it, take it out on me, not on the little lady yonder. She was just kind enough to feed a stray who was so hungry he could've eaten the bark off that sugar pine over there." His bright smile flashed at Judy. "I'm thanking you greatly, miss."

It might have been that his cool, smiling courage was contagious. At any rate, Judy's chin went up and she smiled back at him.

"You're quite welcome, Mr. Curry."

Lute Curry went over to his horse, a rangy, clean-limbed dun, put on the bridle and readjusted the cinch. Then he swung into the saddle and started off at a jog along the southern reach of the road, toward House Rock Valley. Hec Travis and Jeff Cannod disappeared around back to care for their horses.

As the departing echo of hoofs died out, Uncle Spade turned on Judy. "Now," he growled. "We'll see."

Ordinarily Judy would have been frightened, for Uncle Spade had a very bad temper. But from somewhere a strange cool courage came to her rescue and her eyes sparkled challengingly.

"I don't see what all the fuss is about," she cried. "He came riding through, paid his toll and asked if he could buy a meal. I cooked him one and he paid for it. I've done as much for others."

"Yes, when I was around," rumbled Spade Rawlings. "But you know very well what my orders are when you're alone!"

"I've fed Hec Travis and Jeff Cannod when you weren't here," Judy pointed out. "And that was all right with you."

"That's different. Hec and Jeff are old friends, not strangers. That stranger might have—"

"He was the nicest rider who has ever been through here!" cut in Judy. "Not full of raspy snarls like Hec Travis, or mealy talk like Jeff Cannod. Not drunk or rough or cursing like those who ride for Travis and Cannod. I hope—I hope Lute Curry rides by again!"

Spade Rawlings took a step toward his niece. He hadn't whipped her since she was a child but Judy had the feeling he was aiming to do just that now. She stood very straight, looking him fair in the eye.

"If you strike me, now or ever again," she said evenly, her voice going low and full, "I'll go down the road, one way or another, and I'll never come back. Never!"

It might have been sheer astonishment, having Judy stand up to him this way. Or it might have been the unflinching courage and purpose shining in her brown eyes. Whatever it was, it held back Spade Rawlings' uplifted hand. He dropped the hand by his side, gritted his teeth in helpless anger.

"Get on with your chores!" he ordered angrily. "If anything like this ever happens again I'll skin you alive. You hear me?"

THE SPRING HOUSE was at the end of a little timber-shrouded ravine which ran down from the higher slopes of War-

bonnet Peak. It was made of logs and rocks and hard-packed earth, and was set well into the side of the slope sheltering the great and wonderful spring which, from as far back as Judy Rawlings could remember, had never ceased giving off its endless bounty of clear, cold, sparkling water. The spring fed the cabin, the watering trough, the corral, the chicken pen, and there was plenty left over for the truck garden.

Judy was back in the garden again, making little ditches with her hoe, bringing water to the various rows of vegetables. It was nearing sundown. Uncle Spade, Jeff Cannod and Hec Travis were still in the cabin where they had been all afternoon, arguing and talking over something or other. Judy didn't care. She was glad to be alone.

Then, out of nowhere it seemed, a familiar drawling voice reached her. "Act like you don't know I'm around. Just listen and talk with me a minute."

Judy caught her breath, straightened, threw a swift glance up at the spring house. There he was, squatting on his heels, on the side of the spring house away from the cabin. Lute Curry!

"I know you're wondering a lot of things, little lady," he went on, his voice low and clear. "Later I hope to explain. But you got to act like I wasn't around—and I won't be in another ten minutes. Right now I got to know a few things. Will you tell 'em to me and then keep quiet about the whole thing?"

Excitement held Judy silent for a moment. She was bent over her hoe again, trying to think. What was it this Lute Curry would want to know? What could she possibly tell him that would mean anything? Her dark head nodded slightly.

"I'll do my best," she said softly. "What is it?"

"Cattle ever come over this toll road—out of House Rock Valley?"

"Yes. Shipping herds bound for Pinnacle Junction."

"Whose herds?"

"Mostly Hec Travis' and Jeff Cannod's. Those two who came in with Uncle Spade."

"What are their brands?"

"Diamond H T and Hogpen. Once in a while little oufits come by, like Andy Holler's Arrowhead and Pete Lemon's Three Link. Why?"

Lute Curry did not answer immediately. Judy sneaked another glance at him. He was smoothing the earth with his hand, then scratching designs on it with the end of a match, his face frowning in thoughtful concentration. Presently he nodded, as though he had found some sort of answer.

"Travis and Cannod partners?" he asked.

"I don't know. They're together all the time," answered Judy. "Whatever Hec Travis says seems to suit Jeff Cannod."

"These shipping herds—are they mixed breeds or straight Herefords, say?"

"Some Herefords. Mostly mixed breeds, though."

"Can you tell the difference between a clean brand and one that's been tampered with?"

"I'm not sure," said Judy. "I never paid much attention."

"Tell you what you do," Lute said finally. "Next herd that comes through you look over those Diamond H T brands good. See if they look the same on the Herefords as they do on the mixed stuff. And store what you find away in that pretty head of yours, little lady. I'll be coming back one of these days for the answer."

From down at the cabin Spade Rawlings' heavy voice called: "You—Judy! Come down here and start supper!"

Judy straightened up. "Coming!"

She stole a glance at Lute Curry, and he was looking straight at her, his smile and eyes bright. "Maybe a month, maybe six weeks—but I'll be by again. Until then, good-by, Judy!"

There was a caress in his voice that caught at Judy's throat, set her heart to thumping. Her answer was a little above a whisper.

"Good-by, Lute."

It was all she could do to keep from looking back as she went down to the cabin. She was all light and jumpy inside and she had never known the sunset to be so bright and golden before.

Jeff Cannod came into the kitchen while Judy was preparing supper. His manner was sullen, his usual big-toothed smile gone.

"Don't you go taking up with any more stray riders," he said bluntly. "I've already spoken for you to your Uncle Spade. You're headin' toward my wickiup, Judy."

Judy whirled on him, suddenly furious. "I'm nothing of the sort!" she flamed. "I'm no four-legged critter that Uncle Spade can give away, just like that. I have no use for you, Jeff Cannod. I never had and never will!"

"We'll see about that, girl!" Jeff Cannod said meaningly and sulked out of the room.

Judy was so mad she could hardly see to get the rest of the meal.

After they had eaten, Hec Travis and Jeff Cannod rode away toward House Rock Valley. It was then that Judy faced her Uncle Spade angrily and told him what Jeff Cannod had said.

"Is it true that you said that?" she demanded hotly.

"Why not?" came the rumbling answer. "Jeff's all right. Got a good ranch, a big herd and is making money. He can give you a sound home. Yeah, Jeff's all right. You could do a lot worse."

"I hate him!" Judy exploded. "And anything you told him, you better take back. You have no right to say you'll give me away, like—like I was a cow, or something." And with that, she flounced into her room and slammed the door.

WEEKS moved by, and Judy Rawlings was lonely as she had never been before. There had been times in the past when she had felt unhappy and alone, but she'd pulled out of her despair quickly enough. Now, however, it was a different thing and she found herself almost hating the everlasting mountains and the still, brooding timber. Chores became onerous. And always in her thoughts was a lean, yellow-haired figure with a bright, quick smile and a drawling voice.

Lute Curry said he would be back, and to that promise Judy clung desperately.

Came a morning when Uncle Spade gruffly told her that Hec Travis and Jeff Cannod would be bringing a shipping herd over the toll road and that he'd want her at the gate to make a count of the cattle as they filed through. Ten cents a head was the charge, and the task of counting them was an old one with Judy. She thought, with a quick little thrill, of the instructions Lute Curry had given her.

At mid-morning the herd showed up, advertising their approach with the steady, rumbling, complaining bellow of driven cattle. Diamond H T riders were mostly in evidence, but Jeff Cannod and a few of his men were along too.

Judy icily withstood the usual stares, wisecracks and other annoyances, and concentrated on the cattle filing past. Her eyes were bright and quick as she stored the count in her capacious memory. But more importantly, she read brands—and presently she realized with quickening pulse, that there was a difference in the brands of the mixed cattle and the Herefords.

On the mixed stuff the Diamond H T was sharp and clean cut, but on the Herefords only the top half of the Diamond was clear. The lower half was very vague and irregular, and the T under the H was not always in balance with the rest of the brand.

With the herd safely past, Judy gave the count to Uncle Spade and started back for the cabin, only to have Jeff Cannod swing his horse over to block her way.

"Remember what I said. I'm having the ranchhouse all fixed up fine and pretty. We'll make it a wedding they'll date time from. And Spade Rawlings told me that on my way back from Pinnacle Junction this time, I can take you with me."

Judy did not bother to answer him as she dodged past and on into the cabin. But as soon as the herd and the riders were out of sight in the timber to the north, she flew out to face her uncle. Spade Rawlings saw what was in her flaming, furious eyes and he anticipated her.

"It's all settled," he said firmly. "You be ready to go with Jeff. You're old enough and you're gettin' a mite too obstreperous. You need a husband to rein you down. Jeff's the right man. No argument! That's the way it will be."

Judy went through the rest of the day in a sort of daze. She had made her threats to run away, but—where could she run to, and how? Twice in her life she had been as far as the town of Beegum, down in House Rock Valley. But beyond that, nowhere.

Over at the corrals Josh Abbott hooked the team up to the work wagon and he and Spade Rawlings went out across the flats to gather firewood. Uncle Spade seemed to have no worry about her running away. Maybe he knew full well the efficacy of the walls of long, lonely miles. In only one thing could Judy find any small grain of comfort. It would be several days before Jeff Cannod returned from Pinnacle Junction, and during that time—well, something might turn up.

The cabin was a prison, so Judy went up to the garden patch where the afternoon sun lay warm, and the waters from the spring tinkled soothingly. Little bright-colored birds came winging down to drink

at the overflow ditch.

She worked with her hoe for a while, then sat crosslegged in the warm caress of the sun, her dark head bowed in the despondency of her thoughts. She was like this when, from beside the spring house, a drawling voice reached her.

"Hello, Judy Rawlings!"

Lithe as a startled fawn, she was up and turning. "Lute—Lute Curry! Oh, Lute—!"

She never knew quite how it happened, but the next moment his arms were around her.

"Lute," she sobbed, "don't let him take me away. Don't let him—!"

He looked down at her, his eyes grave. "Nobody will take you anywhere you don't want to go, little lady," he comforted quietly. "Now tell me all about it."

Judy did, a trifle incoherently. Lute patted her shoulder. "Don't you worry a mite about this Jeff Cannod hombre," he said. "He ain't got a chance with the competition coming his way. And you say that Cannod and Travis went through this morning with a trail herd? Did you look over the brands, like I said? Were there any Herefords in the herd?"

"Yes there were," Judy told him. "And Lute, the brands on the Herefords were different. Like this." She went on to explain.

"What a break of luck!" he exclaimed. "Scotty and me and the boys can head that herd off long before it gets out of the mountains. And we'll catch Travis and Cannod cold with the goods. Judy honey—you're just like I said you were—wonderful!"

Before Judy could think, he'd caught her close, kissed her full on the lips and was dodging up past the spring house into the wooded ravine above. His easy drawl came back to her. "Sit tight, little lady. I won't be gone as long, this time."

It took Judy a full five minutes to convince herself this wasn't all a wild dream, a marvelous, breathless dream.

JUDY WAS up bright and early the next morning. She did not know why, but somehow she felt that the day coming up was to be the most momentous one life had yet brought to her. Uncle Spade, coming into the kitchen, caught her singing over the breakfast dishes.

"You've changed a heap since yesterday," he said in surprise. "Come to your senses, eh? Figure that being Jeff Cannod's wife is a pretty good idea after all, is that it?"

Judy looked at him, her secret shining in her eyes, but locked in her heart. "You're wrong there, Uncle Spade. I'll never be Jeff Cannod's wife."

Beyond that she refused to say another word, and presently Spade Rawlings stamped out showing his discomfiture.

The morning hours slipped by. The sun climbed high, filling the timber with smoky shafts of golden light, distilling the rich fragrance of balsam from the breath of pine and fir. Judy found herself almost moving on tiptoe with a strange, rising excitement.

Finally it came, the rattle of hoofs along the northern approach of the toll road. Judy ran outside, stopped dead at what she saw. Two riders—Hec Travis and Jeff Cannod. Their horses were foaming. Hec Travis was swaying in his saddle, one side of his tight, mean face smeared with blood. Jeff Cannod looked black and wild and savage.

Spade Rawlings ran to swing the toll gate wide. "What's wrong?" he yelled.

Judy heard Jeff Cannod's heavy, bitter answer. "That rider that was here some weeks ago—the one that fool girl fed and was so friendly with—him and a bunch more jumped us early this morning, down at Piute Flats. Devil to pay. Shot our crowd to rags. We managed to break clear—Hec and me—but they're after us, coming fast. Hec's about done, can't go no further. I'm going on—and I'm taking the girl. Where is she?"

He was swinging his swart head as he spoke and he saw Judy, came spurring fast toward her. Judy whisked into the cabin, slammed and barred the door. Where were her bright dreams now? Where was Lute Curry? Terror caught at her anew.

Jeff Cannod was pounding furiously at the door. "Open up! You'll pay for this—"

But now came the thud of other hoofs storming in. A yell of warning from Uncle Spade. Jeff Cannod left off pounding at the cabin door, headed for his horse at a run.

Judy flung the door wide. She saw Lute Curry racing in from the north, and along with him a big, red-headed man and two more riders. Uncle Spade had swung the toll gate closed again, but Lute Curry never hesitated. He put his big dun to the jump and the horse cleared the gate like a meteor, came charging at Jeff Cannod, who spun in a crouch, guns drawn and shooting.

To Judy's horrified eyes it seemed that Lute Curry was racing right into snarling,

flaming death. But Lute had his guns out now, was shooting, too.

Judy saw Jeff Cannod lurch, sway, his crouch going lower and lower. Then, suddenly, he was on the ground and still, while Lute Curry reined in the mad-charging dun, brought it around, riding high and clean and triumphant in his saddle.

At the toll gate the red-headed rider and the other two were disarming Hec Travis and holding Uncle Spade trapped and glowering under the muzzles of their guns.

* * * * *

Hec Travis, his wounded head bandaged, was hunkered against the wall of the cabin, suddenly an old, cowering, fearful man. Uncle Spade stood beside him, worried and uncertain. Lute Curry, the redhead, Scotty Gordon, and the other two riders faced them. Over by the stable, under a piece of canvas, Jeff Cannod lay quiet in death.

"Scotty and me knew we were losing cattle to rustlers a long time ago, off our Battle River range," Lute Curry said, "and we figured they were landing in House Rock Valley. But we weren't sure where they went from there, or how. We didn't want to barge into something we couldn't handle or end up on some blind trail. So I did a mite of scouting around. I ended up here and found there were some Herefords moving out with shipping herds coming over from House Rock Valley where they go strong for mixed breeds, instead of a straight Hereford strain.

"All Scotty and me run are Herefords, so it was a pretty good gamble that the Herefords that came over this toll road had once been ours, providing we could prove tampered brands. Scotty and me run a Rafter Square iron. Seems that you, Travis, and Jeff Cannod figured it no great chore to blot a Rafter Square to a Diamond H T, which it ain't, except that it takes a mighty careful workman to add to a clear-cut stamp iron brand and keep the blot balanced and even.

"You and Cannod and the rest of your confounded thieves, Travis, got a little careless there. So now you got your answer. We're taking you back to Beegum, Travis—and let your former neighbors figure out the rest of your punishment. Maybe they'll hang you. The least you'll get is plenty of jail."

LUTE CURRY paused, spun a cigarette into shape, then looked at Spade Rawlings. "You couldn't have been too blind to know what was going on," he accused the glowering man. "They were probably paying you to see nothing and say nothing. Well, we'll let it go that you've learned your lesson. The next time, if ever, somebody goes to moving rustled stock over your toll road, you do something about it, pronto. You won't get a second chance. . . .

"Something else. You were ready to give Judy to that whelp Cannod. I could horsewhip you for that. But Judy is shut of you for good right this minute—if she'll have me. There's a ranchhouse waiting for her over on Battle River where, as Mrs. Lute Curry, she'll be a queen—and treated like one. I'm going to find the answer to that now. All right, Scotty—you take over from here. The rest of our boys will be coming along with our cows from Piute Flats pretty quick. I'm hoping it will be Mr. and Mrs. Lute Curry waiting for you at home when you get there."

The hardness had left his eyes when he came into the cabin where Judy had waited, listening to it all. His smile was bright.

"Well, little lady?"

"I'm ready, Lute."

Scotty Gordon, blue eyes fine and friendly, put the reins of his horse, a beautiful, gentle sorrel, in Judy's strong hand.

"Yours, young 'un," he said. "Horse, saddle—the whole layout. Present from old Scotty. May you always ride in happiness."

Judy thanked him, almost speechless with happiness. Uncle Spade came out of the cabin, handed a heavy, clinking buckskin bag to Lute Curry.

"Hers," he said gruffly. "I been an old, stupid fool. I don't deserve a thing, but I want her to have this. She's a good girl. I'm glad things turned out this way."

He turned away, and swift as light, Judy was in front of him, pulling his head down, kissing him. "Everything's fine now, Uncle Spade?"

He nodded. "Everything's fine, lass."

"Every man has the right to make one mistake, Rawlings," Lute Curry said, not unkindly. "You've made yours. We'll be wanting you to come visit us, Judy and me. Yeah, we'll be seeing you."

Spade Rawlings looked Lute square in the eye. "Glad you rode by, son. I mean that."

Judy and Lute rode down and away under the still, fragrant timber along the lonely toll road. Only it wasn't lonely any longer.

Jake went over the rim, and Brennan whirled to face Taggert's barking six-gun

Brennan's Comeback

By STEPHEN PAYNE

CHAPTER I

No More Rodeos

WHEN Alf Brennan stepped out of the Andover hospital, he was certain of one thing—never again would he take part in a rodeo as a contestant. He had put in five years at that game. He'd been stony broke far more often than he'd been flush, and then had come the accident which had cost him four painful, bedridden months.

He now owed bills totaling nine hundred dollars. Yet he did have one asset, fifteen hundred dollars which over a year ago he had handed his pal, Red Slater, with the understanding that if Red located the small spread of their dreams he'd buy it on a fifty-fifty basis.

To date, Brennan had received no word from Red Slater. But now that he was able to ride again he'd drift to that isolated and remote cattle country where Red had gone, and there rebuild his life.

With this in mind, and thankful to be up and around in the bright September sunshine, Brennan took himself to Andover's Livery Stable.

A long-legged, big-shouldered man, still pale and weak from his ordeal, he looked straight out at his fellow man from candid

Smashed-up rodeo rider Alf Brennan runs into more trouble than he's bargained for when he seeks his pal Red Slater in sinister country!

A Complete Novelet

blue eyes in a lean and rather hawkish face. His comrades of the arena said he was too easygoing for his own good. He had a weakness for the underdog which often made him forget that he himself would be too urgently needing entrance fees or money for meals to spare any for some unfortunate ranny.

Perhaps it was these qualities, combined with a strong sense of fair play, which made everyone like Alf Brennan.

The liveryman was no exception. "Sure tickled to see you, Alf. Rodeo game's gettin' better all the time and you'll soon make a comeback."

"No," said the blond rider. "I'm driftin' to cow country and I'll stay as far from rodeos as I can get. You've heard of Hugo's Hole?"

"Hugo's Hole? Yeah, it's sure remote. Only traffic is Hugo Wentworth's freight teams and Hugo's beef herds he trails to the shippin' pens here."

Brennan frowned. "Hold up a jiffy, Ab. Is Hugo's outfit the only one? Red Slater was sure there were small ranchers, too."

"Yep. Settlers did drizzle in there. A few of 'em stuck, too. By the way, only law is Hugo Wentworth's. Seems like he does a good job o' rulin' the roost and he ain't been pizen to little fellers neither. That hole's plumb outa the world, but if you want to bury yourself—"

"Reckon I do, Ab," Brennan chuckled. "You'll lend me a horse and a saddle? I'll make out without a gun."

ALF BRENNAN got the needed horse and saddle. Five days later, he had climbed Rimrock Range, eastern rampart of the deep niche in the mountains known as Hugo's Hole, when a man rode out of a spruce thicket on the pass, and challenged him:

"Pull up. You a badge toter?"

The fellow rode a good horse. He had close-set slate-gray eyes and a thin, hook-nosed face. Cowpuncher duds indicated his calling, but Brennan didn't like the way his clawlike hand hovered above the handle of his .45.

"No." Brennan laughed. "Come again?"

The man eyed him narrowly. "Kinda bleached, like you might be just outa the pen," he remarked. Have you rid with—? Savvy the burro?"

"No! Get to it. What do you want and why'd you stop me?"

"I'm watching this pass to turn strangers back."

As Brennan looked his disbelief, the man's spooky bay danced sideways and wheeled, showing Brennan the H W brand—Hugo Wentworth's brand—on its left hip.

"Meaning badge toters or hombres just outa the pen ain't welcome?" Brennan asked quietly.

"Meanin'," rasped the other, "no strangers is welcome. But afore you turn back—"

"I ain't turnin' back," Brennan retorted, anger rising in him. "A friend of mine is in the Hole. Happen to know Red Slater?"

Recognition of the name flashed in the man's cold eyes, or so Brennan believed. But his answer was a curt, immediate denial.

"Nope!" He whipped out his Colt. "Unload yourself. Then turn your back, stand hitched, hands grabbin' sky."

White-lipped with impotent fury, Brennan submitted to being searched. "Coyote," as he now called the gunman, also examined the cowboy's saddle and the coat tied behind it and showed bitter disappointment at finding no money. He exhibited uncertainty and hesitation, as if in the habit of obeying orders from a higher up. But at last he said:

"Well, get a-goin'."

"You'll stop me, with lead, from riding into the Hole?"

"Ride where you danged please. But I've warned you. See if I care."

Burned up, yet puzzled, Brennan rode down the western slope of Rimrock Range. The mighty panorama of Hugo's Hole with its buttes, hogbacks, piney ridges and deep meadow valleys, completely surrounded by massive, upflung mountains, unfolded before him. Cattle and horses grazed on the open range, but ranch buildings were few and far between. There was room here for many, many more settlers.

Brennan turned left off the wagon track road, making his way across country toward one ranch and as his horse passed around a turn in a wide swale, he came upon a man with a rifle, who was stepping away from a buckskin horse which he had just tied to a pine tree. Farther along the swale stood a saddled horse with bridle reins a-trail, obviously the man's mount.

Himself unseen, Brennan gave frowning attention to the fellow, who, crouching now on one knee, had brought his rifle to his shoulder and was sighting along its barrel.

At what? Good lord! He was aiming at the dun horse!

"Hold it!" Brennan yelled, spurring forward. "What's the idea?"

The man's gun roared, but, disconcerted by Brennan's shout, the fellow missed his mark. He was, Brennan noted, a stalwart, swarthy fellow with rough-hewn features, challenging dark eyes and an uncombed mop of jet black hair so heavy it resembled a wig.

The eyes of the two men met and locked before the fellow growled, "This ain't none of your butt-in, stranger. What business you got here?"

TEMPER flared in Brennan. "Why were you going to kill that horse?" he countered. The dun, with a black stripe down its back, black mane and tail, was a mettlesome young bronc, and, to Brennan's experienced eye, seemed tough, wiry and untamed.

"No skin off your nose," the dark man replied curtly. "Get outa the way! I'm going to shoot Hornet, and don't try to stop me!" Glowering at Brennan, he started to work the lever of his rifle.

Brennan stopped trying to argue. Instead, he spurred straight at the man, and left his saddle the way he did when bulldogging steers. The rifle clattered to the ground as the cowboy landed on the swarthy fellow, knocked him down and instantly pinned him with a wrestler's hold.

Yet Brennan was suddenly and shockingly aware that he had overestimated his own strength. Stabbing pain shot through his bones and muscles, his breath came in short gasps, and he realized he could not hold this tough adversary powerless for long.

"You'll be a good dogie?" he panted.

"Yeah. Only let up. Let up!"

Brennan reached out with a spur-shod boot and dragged the rifle toward him. He released his hold, snatched the weapon and sprang to his feet. The other man was not wearing a six-shooter and the rifle had been reloaded, so Brennan now held the advantage.

"We'll talk this over my way," he announced. "I'm Alf Brennan. What's your handle?"

The man got up slowly, felt of his right shoulder and arm and glared at the cowboy with hatred in his dark eyes.

"I'm Sherm Taggart," he muttered. "And I'm tellin' you, get outa Hugo's Hole. None of us like strangers."

"Why not?"

Taggart did not reply at once. He was gazing south along the swale toward a rider who had come in sight and was spurring fast. The man grumbled something under his breath and swore, then gave Brennan his attention.

"Gimme that long gun."

"That'll be the first thing I'll do!" said Brennan grimly. "Not that I'm stealing it. I'll leave it wherever you say and you can get it later."

"Well, lemme take my hoss and light out of here?"

"Why?" Brennan snapped.

"I don't want that gal comin' yonder to see me caught in such a danged humiliating fix. For gosh sake, Brennan, have a heart and let me—"

Brennan whistled sharply. "So that's how you feel! Well, take your horse and burn the breeze. But leave Hornet here."

Without replying, Taggart ran to his horse, flung himself into his saddle and dashed over the pine-studded rise to the west.

CHAPTER II
A Golden Girl

BRENNAN turned his attention to the rider coming from the south. He saw a hatless blond girl astride a spotted pony. Her honey-colored hair, flying in the wind, framed an attractive, smooth-cheeked face with a cute little nose, firm lips, and lovely gray-green eyes. As she brought her pony to a skidding stop, her first glance was at the dun horse. Then she looked Brennan over with amazement and what seemed relief.

"I heard a shot. What happened here, Mister? Where'd Taggart go so fast?" Her words all ran together.

Brennan lifted his hat and gave her a reassuring smile. "Lady, let's start off with everything straight. Taggart had a notion he'd shoot that yellow horse. I stopped him and he took himself off."

"You mean you ran him off?" she cried, and went right on, "I was afraid of it. Dad and my brother Frank, and Sherm Taggart, were acting mysterious, and when I saw Sherm leading Hornet away from our Dia-

mond Bar ranch, I knew they'd decided he must be killed."

"You didn't want Hornet shot?" asked Brennan, and as the girl shook her head a warm glow ran over his body. He had done right by butting into this situation. "So you got your pony and flogged out on the trail Taggart had taken. Where's he fit into this? Is he a relative? Does he have an interest in Diamond Bar?"

"No, and no again," the girl returned, laughing tensely. "Taggart's a neighbor—a particular friend, too, I must tell you at once. You see, brother Frank tried to break Hornet and got his shirt dirty several times, so Sherm took over."

"Yes?" questioned Brennan, stepping closer to the girl and allowing his eyes an enjoyable feast. She was about twenty, he decided, an unspoiled and natural range girl, and somehow he didn't at all like the idea of Taggart's being her particular friend.

"That was day before yesterday," she resumed. "Sherm'd show Hornet who was boss. But Hornet busted him wide open. Hornet did it again twice yesterday and, as you may guess, Sherm was in a vile temper. Today he came back to Diamond Bar and—well, I'm glad you came along in time to save Hornet. Even if the horse is an outlaw and can't be broken to ride."

Impulsively Brennan broke in, "Miss, if this horse is as tough as you and Sherm say, he's worth real money."

Her expression changed to incredulity. "Worth real money? An outlaw's no good except for coyote bait. You didn't really mean that?"

He nodded emphatically, and grinned. A little bell in the back of his mind was telling him not to mention rodeos, but he ignored the warning.

"I'm Alf Brennan, rodeo contestant, so I know how hard it is to find good bucking horses and how valuable they are. I'm dog-goned happy this horse is yours, not Sherm's."

"Rodeo contestant?" the girl's lips were parted, her eyes wide. "What do you mean, Alf? I'm Hope Sorrels. I came here when I was only five and I've never been out of these hills since, so I don't know anything except what I hear about the outside world. Tell me."

Brennan chuckled. She was so eager, so alive, so genuine, yet so naive.

"Suppose," he suggested, "I lead Hornet back to your ranch and we talk as we ride, Miss Sorrels?"

She smiled. "That'll be just dandy. Careful how you go up to Hornet. I admire his fire and courage, and I sympathize with his not wanting to become a pet and work for man."

Brennan got his livery horse and tied the rifle on his saddle. He mounted before he untied Hornet and snubbed the lead rope to his saddle horn.

"All set, Miss Sorrels."

"You do know your stuff," she said admiringly, reining her pony alongside his. "I mean how to handle an outlaw. Call me Hope. I'm a bit stuck-up. What about rodeo contestants, Alf?"

"Well," Brennan began, "all over the country small towns and big cities are putting on outdoor shows with bronc riding, roping, bulldogging and the like. Cowboy stuff as well as races. Quite recently they decided on a common name for these shows—rodeos."

THE girl's eyes sparkled. "That life must be thrilling, exciting, glorious."

Brennan pulled a wry face. "Well, maybe. But I found it—" He paused. After all, why disillusion Hope Sorrels? He grinned and changed his tone.

"Well, yes, it is thrilling. Listen."

Hope hung on his brief, clear exposition of exactly what a rodeo was and of what various contestants did to please and amuse and thrill their audiences. As he warmed to his story he found himself unconsciously caught again by the allure and fascination of rodeo arena battles.

"And you see, Hope, the bigger the show the bigger the prizes hung up for the winners."

"How big?" she asked quickly.

"Oh, five hundred to a thousand dollars or more for bronc riding, steer roping and bulldogging."

"Wonderful! Alf, you must have made lots of money at that game."

Brennan was silent.

"Now I'm afraid of what Sherm Taggart may do," Hope went on. "He's stubborn when he's made up his mind. Gets ugly, too. Oh, dear! My folks."

"What's wrong now, Hope?" Brennan asked. She amused and at the same time disturbed him. In the rodeo game he had met many fascinating girls—some hard-boiled ones, too—but none had ever interested and

charmed him as did slender, graceful Hope Sorrels.

She gave him a level look. "Dad and Mother and Frank are going to be all upset when I bring home a stranger I'm talking with like an old friend," she said.

Riding stirrup to stirrup with her, Brennan chuckled. "I feel as if we were old friends, Hope."

"Oddly, I do, too. The little kids, Nance and Danny, will like you, Alf. But Dad's a suspicious old settler." She reached out and tapped the rifle stock. "When Dad and Frank learn you had a fight with Sherm I don't know how they'll take it."

"They go for Sherm Taggart, eh?"

"Of course. He's a go-getter really. Got a sweet little outfit and he's making money. Bought a hundred yearlings last fall."

Brennan squirmed. Apparently Taggart had the world by the tail. And what did Alf Brennan have?

"Why are Mr. Sorrels and Frank so suspicious of strangers?" he inquired.

Her eyes clouded. "I suppose it may go back to hard times on another range when I was only a toddler. Big cowmen weren't friendly to little fellows, and dad suspected strangers who came scouting around were up to no good. Then, just last year, that red-headed fellow gave all of us a terrific jolt and a bad scare."

"Red-headed fellow?" Brennan's voice was casual, but he was tense.

"Yes. A stranger cowboy, something like you. He said he wanted to buy a little spread and he rode around looking at every place. But Hugo Wentworth, who is the big man here, declares this red-headed fellow was merely sizing up the horse herds, getting set to pull off his big steal."

The saddle horses and Hornet had now crossed a ridge and in the distance Brennan saw the meadow and neat buildings of a ranch.

"Tell me more," he said quietly.

"I'm doing all the talking, Alf. Well, this stranger and fifty-odd horses disappeared one night. Neither the horses nor Red Slater have ever been found."

Brennan was rigid in his saddle. "Did you say Red Slater, Hope?"

"That was the red-headed thief's name. Most of the horses he got away with belonged to Hugo Wentworth. Of course Hugo's cowboys hunted high and low. But—" Hope dropped her bridle reins and gestured with both hands. "No dice. Alf, what's the matter?"

"Nothing," he protested, but his smile was forced. Whether or not Red was guilty, Brennan had surely lost the stake he'd given his friend and his hope for a ranch and a home was now gone. Of course he didn't believe Red had gone haywire. But, with the trail stone cold, how could Brennan hope to solve the sinister mystery and clear his pal's name?

CHAPTER III

Cold Reception

SILENT now, the girl and the man arrived at a full set of log buildings near a cottonwood bordered creek. The ranch meadow, dotted with haystacks, extended south along the valley and Brennan gave it his approval.

"A sweet spread, Hope. I'll bet you like it?"

The girl said, "Oh, I love it," and added in a worried tone, "Alf, don't cross Dad, even if he makes you boiling mad. Hello, Dad. Hello, Frank."

The two men halted their work of rebuilding a corral gate and stared at Hope and her escort. Brennan noted that Frank was a mere youth with features and eyes like his sister's. The older man, gaunt, slab-shouldered, weather-beaten, with a reddish-gold beard, gave Brennan his frowning attention, as he cut short Hope's introduction.

"So his name's Brennan? How come he's leadin' that hoss? Where's Taggart?"

Brennan took the initiative. "All this is easy explained, Mr. Sorrels. I persuaded Sherm Taggart not to shoot Hornet. Then I met up with Hope and we brought the horse home."

"And Alf Brennan tells me—" Hope began.

"Hold it, girl!" Sorrels interrupted crustily. "What business you got takin' up with a plumb stranger?"

Hope said, "Oh, Daddy," and stopped.

Brennan smiled disarmingly. "She couldn't help herself, Mr. Sorrels."

The youth pointed to the rifle on Brennan's saddle. "Look, Dad! That's Taggart's gun. And this feller's got it. What's it mean?"

If the situation had not been so serious and he had not wished to make friends, Brennan would have laughed. To him the hostility and suspicions of these two seemed ridiculous. He said quietly:

"Taggart wouldn't want you folks to know it, but I got the best of him in a wrestlin' match. Then he was so kinda unreasonable I kept his gun and he rode away."

As father and son exchanged skeptical glances, Hope spoke decisively.

"It's the truth. I'm glad Taggart didn't kill Hornet. You will be, too, for Alf tells me outlaws are worth any amount of cash for rodeo horses."

"Huh?" ejaculated Frank and looked at Brennan with abrupt lessening of hostility. "I've heard of rodeos. But Sherm said Hornet wasn't worth anything. Hey, you a bronc rider?"

Brennan laughed and the tension was broken, even though Sorrels still was glowering at the blond rider. Hope's eyes were dancing once again. She slipped lightly from her saddle and said:

"I've asked Alf to stay all night, Dad. Now I'll run along to help mother get supper."

Frank stepped close to Brennan's stirrup. "Gosh! Did you really get the upper hand of Taggart?"

"I'm here, and I've got his gun," said Brennan. "And, folks, if this Hornet can really turn it on, he's worth money."

"I'm from Missouri," rapped Sorrels. "Show me."

"Alf Brennan, if you think Hornet can't pitch, you try him out," Frank cried. "Jus' try 'im! That's all I ask."

Brennan laughed again. "I reckon I'll have to, Frank. I've got to know if Hornet's a bad one—which, in the rodeo world, means a good one."

"Come along to the round corral," Frank invited.

APPROXIMATELY fifteen minutes later, Alf Brennan rose from the corral dust, picked up his hat, mopped his face with his bandanna and eyed the dun named Hornet with genuine admiration and respect. Once a professional bronc rider, he hadn't lasted long atop the buckskin cyclone.

The test wasn't all-conclusive, for there were many better riders than Brennan, but he was satisfied that this horse was plumb good—satisfied, too, on another point which had been worrying him deeply.

He had feared that following the beating and smashup which had put him in the hospital, he might have lost his nerve. But he hadn't! That he now felt dizzy and wobble-kneed was only because he was still weak and had been too long out of the game.

Brennan had been keenly aware that Hope and her mother and two younger members of the family, a girl of about sixteen and a boy younger, had joined Frank and Dad Sorrels to see the show. He now heard Hope's thrilled voice:

"I hope you're not hurt, Alf. Will Hornet do?"

"Don't take a cent less than one thousand smackers for that horse," he replied.

Hope caught her breath. "Good!" she cried. "Nance, Nance, honey," hugging her younger sister, "now I—we can send you away to school. You'll get all those wonderful things I missed. It's like a dream coming true."

Brennan heard Dad Sorrel's gasp of sheer amazement, and then he became aware of three more people. One was Sherm Taggart, another an ordinary cowpuncher, the third a stocky and solid man with a fringe of white hair under his hat, a white mustache, and a rugged, shrewd face which looked as if it had been chipped from granite. The strong personality of this third man seemed to reach out and touch everyone present.

Taggart pointed at Brennan in the corral. "That's the bird," he shouted. "That's the trouble maker, Hugo."

Frank Sorrels had caught the panting, sweating Hornet and was removing the saddle. Brennan plodded to the fence and leaned heavily against it, resenting his dizziness and exhaustion.

"So I'm a trouble maker, Taggart?" he asked mildly.

"Yep," snapped Taggart. "Folks, this feller's a suspicious character. Just like I've told Hugo, this Brennan come on me as I was about to put that yellow outlaw outa the way for good and all, to stop his eatin' feed he won't earn, when Brennan butted in.

"Not expecting him to get ugly, I had laid down my rifle. He grabbed it, told me to get or he'd blow my head off. I couldn't do anything else with a gunhawk holding a rifle on me."

"That's not the way I heard it," said Hope, her eyes flashing with anger.

Taggart turned on the girl. "Don't tell me you believed his story! The cuss would

have stole Hornet and lit out with him if you hadn't come along just then. He didn't lick me. There wasn't no fight."

"Come, Hope," ordered Mrs. Sorrels. "We'll go to the house. Come, Nance, Danny. This is no place for us. Men, supper's ready."

She walked away with Nance and Danny, the boy openly reluctant. But Hope held her ground.

"Sherm, why'd you get Hugo Wentworth?" she demanded.

"Because he had to know, pronto, there was a suspicious hombre in his country. A feller as bad or worse'n that horse thief, Red Slater," snapped Taggart.

The girl's eyes looked through him. "I think," she said, "you're being an awfully poor sport."

"You sticking up for him, Hope?" Taggart sputtered, red-faced.

"Yes. Mr. Wentworth, everybody, let's stop this nonsense and go eat."

Brennan cuffed his hat down over his openly admiring eyes and hid a grin. Hope might have been raised in the back-woods, but she had plenty of spunk and fire.

"Well, Hugo, you know me and you know my side of this," Sherm Taggart growled. "What you sayin'?"

Hugo Wentworth, who had taken his disconcerting gaze from Brennan only to flash a few quick glances at Hope, said laconically, "Let's all go to supper," and again clamped shut his trap-like mouth.

Taggart's jaw fell. "Danged if I'll stay and eat with that saddle tramp," he rasped, and, wheeling his mount, rode away fast.

SUPPER on the Diamond Bar was a silent meal. Afterward, while Hugo Wentworth stayed in the house to talk with the Sorrels family, Brennan took himself to the stable. When the cowman appeared, Brennan said:

"I want a medicine talk with you alone, Mr. Wentworth."

Hugo nodded, and led the way across the yard in the starlight, halting at a buck-and-pole fence. He sat down on the bottom pole and packed a pipe with plug tobacco.

"Well?"

Brennan stood in front of him. "First, let's get this straight." He related his experience with the man who had stopped him on the pass. "He is your man?"

Hugo's eyebrows had lifted. Now they drew down and met above his nose. "No. You say he rode an H W horse?"

"Yes, a bay, and a darned good one. He wasn't acting on your orders to stop strangers?"

"He was not! I don't place that jigger, nor do I sell horses with my brand on 'em. I'm reminded I had nigh fifty head stolen early last summer."

"You mind telling me all you know about that steal and about Red Slater?" Brennan asked.

"Slater came here in June over a year ago. I heard talk he wanted to buy a goin' ranch and was scoutin' the Hole."

"You met him? You can describe him, Hugo?"

"Yes. This fellow was—"

The description left no remaining doubt in Brennan's mind that the man accused of stealing horses here was the same Red Slater he had known and trusted.

"About a month after Slater's coming," Hugo resumed, "my punchers missed the horses out of a pasture. It had rained savage and there was no sign of which way they'd gone. Within the next two days we made sure Red Slater too was missing."

"Nobody saw Red stealing horses, yet he's accused?"

"What else are we to think?"

"A number of explanations are more reasonable," Brennan replied. "Fifty-odd horses? H'mm? No man could handle 'em alone. How many roads lead into the Hole?"

"Only two," Wentworth said. "One from the north, another from the south."

"I'll bet my last dollar there's a third trail—one known to owlhooters and horse thieves."

Hugo Wentworth puffed his pipe. "Except for a fur trapper who discovered this place," he said, "I was the first white man to explore it. I've been here twenty-three years and, if there's another trail, I or my punchers would have found it."

"Who else was missing from your country at the time of the steal?" Brennan demanded.

THE question astonished Hugo. "Why—nobody that I know of. Yet I hadn't thought of it."

"Several things you didn't think of before damning Red," said Brennan bitingly. "Did you know Red Slater had three thousand dollars cash?"

"No. I supposed his talk of buying a spread was all a blind. Never figured he really had a stake."

"He did," stated Brennan grimly. "Half of it was mine. That three thousand bucks was our chance to get into business on our own. Excuse me for speakin' of myself, but I was smashed up in the rodeo game. I'm far worse off than just being broke. I'd hoped to meet Red Slater here and begin life over. That hope's gone.

"But I must get to the bottom of this snakish mess, Hugo, because Red was my pal and as square as they come. I'm sure that somebody got wise that he had the money, killed him to get it and also framed him for horse stealing. The coyote I met on the pass, Hugo, rode an H W horse. And that could mean something."

Brennan broke off abruptly. He thought he heard a rustle of movement in the sage on the far side of the buck-and-pole fence, but when he scrambled through the fence he found no one. He returned to the cowman.

"I've only your word that there was any such geezer on the pass," Wentworth said. "But, come daybreak, I'll have two punchers looking into it."

"Fair enough," said Brennan. "Now, are you lettin' me stay in Hugo's Hole?"

Hugo Wentworth got up and looked squarely at the blond cowboy. "A word from me would railroad you out of here. But I won't give that word—yet. On the other hand I won't interfere in your fight with Sherm Taggart."

"Taggart counted on you to throw me out," Brennan said. "I hoped that after this medicine talk you'd tell him to sing low, because I don't want trouble and he asks for it."

In the starlight, Brennan detected a twinkle in the grizzled old cowman's eyes, an amused smile on his lips under the white mustache.

"We-ll, put yourself in his boots. Wouldn't your nose be outa joint if a stranger showed up and your girl showed marked interest in that stranger—even to taking his side against you?"

Brennan was taken aback. "Hold on now! Sherm Taggart and I only clashed about a horse."

Hugo Wentworth dug a thumb into his side and chuckled. "Is that all? Let's go back."

CHAPTER IV

The Past Beckons

COWMAN and puncher returned to the Diamond Bar stable where Hugo's man, talking low voiced with Frank Sorrels, was waiting. Hugo stepped up to his saddle, the puncher reined his mount alongside, and Brennan stood looking after them as the soft darkness, scented with pine and sage, hid them. His hostility toward Hugo Wentworth had evaporated and Frank Sorrels' query, "How you like him, Alf?" brought an immediate:

"He's a plumb good scout, Frank. You didn't sight or hear anyone snooping hereabouts?"

The youth shook his head. "Hugo told us Sorrels that he thought you were all to the good," he blurted. "Told us, too, you were right about outlaw horses being worth money. Now about Hornet, Alf— Oh, here's Hope. She'll tell you what we've been talking over."

Hope, so vitally alive she seemed unable to move slowly, came rushing up to Brennan. Bubbling with eagerness, she said:

"Alf, Frank and I and Mother've put our heads together and because you're onto the ropes and we aren't, and you know all about rodeos and good bucking horses and everything, you can do something wonderful for us—mostly for Nance."

She paused for breath while Brennan thought happily, "I'd do anything in the world for her—and love it." But as her plan unfolded a moment later, he was suddenly dismayed. Hope wanted him to take her and Frank and Hornet to one of the major rodeos.

The girl was dancing with the thrill of anticipation as she rushed on.

"You can enter Hornet in this rodeo, and of course you'll win big prizes for yourself as a contestant and, when it's over, you can sell Hornet for us. How about it, Alf? The plan suit you?"

Brennan looked down at his boots, and the irony of this situation bit into him. He'd known that he was through with rodeos. Moreover, his immediate and all important job was to solve the mystery of Red's strange disappearance and clear his name.

Hope and Frank were watching him anxiously, but the silence dragged on until the girl spoke again pleadingly.

"You see, Alf, this outfit doesn't make any money. Barely enough to live on and let us get by. So the money from Hornet will be the Godsend we've hoped and prayed for—the money to send Nance to school. Can't you realize what that means to her? To us?"

Brennan's head came up quickly. He grinned at the girl and boy.

"It's a go, kids! There's a big rodeo at Red Bluffs, and we'll just have time to get there." He spun on his heel and raced for the corner of the stable. Hadn't he heard a faint sound there? He shot around the corner and stopped, seeing nothing that moved in the silence.

TWELVE days later, Brennan and Hope and Frank Sorrels, returning from the Red Bluffs Rodeo, camped atop Rimrock Range with a short ride to Diamond Bar still ahead of them. That night, as had been their custom throughout this pack horse camping trip, Hope retired to her small tent, her brother placed his bed in front of it, and Brennan bedded down at a distance.

It was a glorious autumn night with a woodsy fragrance on the tangy air and the stars apparently so near a man might gather a cluster of them in his hands. Brennan lay wide awake, smiling with many happy memories.

First, there was the touching, heart-warming scene when he and Frank and Hope had left Diamond Bar with the good wishes of Dad and Mrs. Sorrels and the tearful, yet joyful farewells of Nance and small Danny. The kids had longed to go, too, but had understood that was definitely out.

Atop the range, Brennan had hoped to meet cowboys of the H W, cutting for sign of the man about whom he had told Hugo Wentworth. But he had not seen them, nor anyone else.

The five-day trip to Red Bluffs, north of Andover, camping every night, Hope had made unforgettably pleasant. Then, in Red Bluffs, Brennan had been the guide and counselor for two eager, excited and thrilled youngsters. Hope's aliveness, her terrific interest in everything, her unbounded enthusiasm smothered his own boredom until Brennan found himself sharing the ardor and animation of his young charges. All of this had been the best tonic imaginable for Alf Brennan.

Tonight, the memory of that three-day rodeo was pure pleasure. Inspired by Hope Sorrels, Brennan had stopped thinking of himself as a certain loser, or at best a third-money man. He wasn't yet strong enough to enter the bulldogging, but he had ridden broncs better than ever and he'd won the calf roping. Always mighty handy with a rope, and with Hope to cheer him on, this time he'd astounded competitors and judges —and himself.

Thanks to his rodeo savvy Brennan had contrived to enter Hornet as a bucking horse and Hornet had opened all eyes. The fighting dun had put three riders down in one-two-three order—Brennan, however, not one of them—and had won the two hundred dollars award as top bucker.

This had been followed by a three-hundred-dollar special purse for an exhibition ride on this new, great rodeo horse. The money was to go to the rider if he made the ride, to the horse or its owner if he failed. The rider had lost the fight!

After all this, Brennan had had no trouble in selling the horse for the Sorrels family for eleven hundred dollars.

It had been one unforgettable, victorious rodeo because of the joy and thrills it had given Hope and Frank and consequently Brennan himself. Long before it was over he was head over heels in love with Hope Sorrels. He liked it too, only—only—

He squirmed on his hard bed as if he saw the hulking shadow of Sherm Taggart standing between him and Hope, who still spoke matter-of-factly of marrying Taggart. Brennan had not told her of his love, for he figured a man with nothing to offer a girl couldn't honorably do this.

And there was still on his hands a grim job, that of solving the Red Slater mystery. Brennan had picked up from the Red Bluffs sheriff some information on the best-known horse thief in this part of the world, known as One Thumb Bittner. Although he was a marked man, Bittner managed to sell stolen horses for good prices, but he covered such a wide range that the lawman had no idea where he might be found.

Suddenly remembering the fellow "Coyote" who had held him up on his way into Hugo's Hole, two weeks ago, Brennan sat up and looked toward the five picketed horses. They were grazing quietly, giving no indication

that prowlers might be near. He looked anxiously toward Hope's tent beyond the dying camp fire, thinking tenderly of her.

Frank was a darned fine kid, too. Sleeping outside Hope's tent, Frank had on him the fifteen hundred dollars this venture had netted the Sorrels after deducting expenses.

Brennan had sent his own earnings to the Andover hospital, and now for a moment he worried about Frank's having charge of so much money. Then, murmuring, "Shuckins! Nobody's snooping around here," he turned over and went to sleep.

SOME indefinite time later, Alf Brennan came awake to stare stupidly at a six-shooter pointed at his nose. Behind the gun was a man's crouching figure and as recognition flashed into Brennan's sleep-heavy eyes, he cried,

"You, Coyote!"

"Shut your trap!" hissed the gunman. "Make any noise and danged if we won't kill both them Sorrels kids. I got a pard. See him? He's saddlin' your hoss. Do just as I say or the gal gets it."

Brennan sat up, his gaze going to Hope's tent as steel toward a magnet. It looked okay, but something had happened to Frank. Half out of his bed, the lad lay sprawled, his figure limp and still, and Brennan guessed he had been knocked cold and then robbed. Flaming anger gripped him. But in a tense whisper Coyote was repeating his threat.

"Squawk, and you'll put the gal in the same fix you're in. Pull on your duds."

Brennan dressed, and Coyote marched him to where his partner had saddled Brennan's mount and was holding it and the four Diamond Bar horses, as well as his own and Coyote's mounts.

No one Brennan had ever seen before, this man was middle-aged and rawboned yet husky, with brutal features and wicked eyes. He tied Brennan to his saddle and soon the two outlaws, leading Brennan's mount and the other four horses, were moving.

For approximately half an hour Brennan's captors rode north. Then they halted and sacked the feet of each horse. The material for this they had tied to their saddles, and they did the job with quiet speed and efficiency.

Afterward, they circled back around the camp and took a course almost due south, along the crust of Rimrock Range, a land of open swales and dense spruce thickets and abrupt gulches, many of them clogged with fallen timber.

CHAPTER V

The Cards Are Down

DAYLIGHT was driving stars into hiding when at last the men reined in at a point where a low saddle cut across the mountains from west to east, an extremely rough area, spotted with thickets and enormous rocks.

The big, rangy fellow broke his long silence. "We had orders not run off at the mouth, Jake, but I kinder reckon it'll torture this Brennan a heap more if we do tell him a thing or two," he remarked.

Jake, whom Brennan had until now called "Coyote," chuckled. "Yeah, Burl, I reckon it will," he agreed. "Well, Brennan, you sure got in Sherm Taggart's hair."

"Bosh!" scoffed Brennan. "If there was any sporting blood in that jigger, he'd admit I was right and he'd appreciate how much that outlaw horse has meant to the Sorrels."

" 'Sportin' blood'?" jeered the rough-hewn rider now indentified as Burl. "He had a right to be proddy. First you walloped him, next his scheme to get old Hugo to throw you out backfired, then you stole his gal."

"Nor that ain't all," Jake added. "When Taggart larnt you was Red Slater's pard, he was scairt you'd get to the bottom of that deal."

Brennan tried not to show how keen was his interest, for he now knew that Taggart or one of his men had been listening to Brennan's medicine talk with Hugo Wentworth that night at the Diamond Bar. More than this, he now had a definite clue to the horse stealing.

Suddenly he recalled Hope's having said that last autumn Taggart had bought one hundred yearlings, and Brennan all at once decided Taggart had paid for them with Red's and Brennan's money, which Taggart had stolen from Red!

"So you work for Taggart, Jake," he said coolly, "yet you were kinda on your own when you stopped me atop the pass on Rimrock Range. What was your game that day?"

Jake grinned wickedly. "Aw, I figured

maybe you was an owlhooter. When you didn't give me the right answer to a certain question, you'll remember, I knowed you wasn't. Then I allowed I'd rob you. Dang you, you didn't have nothin'."

"If I had had?" pressed Brennan.

"I'd ha' shot you after I'd got it.'"

"Nice boy, ain't you, Jake?" remarked Brennan pleasantly and turned to the other man. "Burl, what were you going to tell me that would torture me?"

"Taggart was in touch with us boys," Burl said, "and he could have had you drygulched and stopped you from takin' Hornet, and Taggart's gal, to the rodeo. But he played this foxy. He says, 'Let that play go through and if they get any dough we'll grab it as they come home.' "

Jake took up where the big roughneck left off. "Yeah. Now, Brennan, how's it goin' to look to Miss Sorrels when she pokes outa her tent this mornin'? She'll see her brother laid out and robbed, you gone, all the hosses gone. The gal will sure think you've proved a double-crossin' snake!

"Wal, just about now—daybreak—Sherm Taggart'll bob up. He'll say he was so eager to meet Miss Sorrels and Frank comin' back from Red Bluffs, that he left home powerful early. He'll be terrible shocked when he sees what's happened.

"But of course when he has only one horse, and Hope and Frank has none, he can't take them two with him while he flogs out to run down that underhanded, sneakin', lower'n-a-snake crook, Brennan."

Digesting this, Brennan felt his face whiten. "Anything more?" he asked harshly.

"Only that Sherm Taggart—after the gosh awfullest chase and the hardest fight ever was told about—will recover the Sorrels' dough and their horses. But Brennan, so he'll say, escaped. How you like it, cowboy?"

Brennan's only reply was to strain against his bonds.

"Let's dump him in that blind pocket and get it over with," said Burl. "Somethin' for you to see down thar afore you kick out," he added, to Brennan.

WITH this, the two toughs took the cowboy from his saddle and half dragged him to the rim of what he observed was a freakish hole in the earth, a natural, rock-walled pit.

"Do we heave him over?" asked Burl.

"Nope," said Jake. "Orders was to make him suffer. Starve to death."

He attached a rope to an outjutting boulder on the rim of the hole and dropped its length down into the pit.

His hands bound in front of his body, Brennan was ordered to grab the rope and slide—or be thrown over. Brennan elected to slide.

He believed the hole no deeper than thirty feet, but he had descended less than half that distance when his captors cut the rope. But the blond cowboy's long experience in rodeos stood him in good stead.

As a bulldogger, he was accustomed to leap from the back of a racing horse to grasp a steer's horns, yet to land on his feet in such a manner as to suffer no injury. Now, badly jolted though he was, he was unharmed when he found himself at the bottom of the rockbound hole.

A short minute later Brennan saw what his captors had wanted him to see—a human skeleton in tattered and rotting range garb. He was sure it was all that remained of Red Slater, and, as he frantically circled his strange prison seeking a way of escape, he found something which confirmed this belief.

Apparently Red's plunge into the pit had not killed him. He had lived to chisel with a piece of granite on soft sandstone under an overhanging ledge a grim message:

Four men robbed me. Stole horses. Took 'em on trail from Hole east past this place. Sherm Taggart—Jake Dorgan—Burl Harl. Taggart boss, sold horses to One Thumb Bittner 4th man. Hope someone sees this and justice done. Alf Brennan's to get all I owned. Afraid he'll think I double-crossed him.

Red Slater.

Brennan felt a lump in his throat. Red's dying thought had been fear that his pard would believe he had double-crossed him. Square-shooting Red, a man to ride the river with, he had managed to leave behind him the most damning indictment ever penned against four ruthless robbers and murderers.

Yet as he considered his own predicament, Brennan felt utter hopelessness. Except possibly another victim of this cold-blooded gang, no one would ever get to read this message.

A strange sound caught his attention, and he stiffened with stark horror as another human being slid down the precipitous slope

and thumped against the rocky floor of the pit.

Brennan blinked, refusing to believe what his eyes told him—that it was Hope Sorrels. But it was Hope, wearing gloves with which, Brennan now observed, she had gripped a rope to ease her rapid descent. The rope, drawn upward from above, vanished as Brennan leaped out from beneath the overhanging ledge and crouched beside the girl.

AFTER a minute she opened her eyes and regarded him with dazed wonder.

"Alf! You're alive! You are! Thank God! I'll be all right. Not hurt—much."

"Hope! Hope darling," he choked. They'd not escape from this gruesome place, so at least he might now tell her what was in his heart. "Darling, how come? I know what Taggart had in mind, but—but I see it didn't work out like he planned."

Hope laughed almost hysterically. "I don't know what he had in mind, Alf." She sat up, noticing the skeleton and shuddering. "Oh, what's that?" she cried.

"It can't hurt us," Brennan answered. He held his hands out toward her. "Untie or cut this cord on my wrists if you can."

Hope untied the knots, then drew closer to him and he put an arm around her shaking shoulders.

"What happened to you, dear!"

"It's simple, really," she said, low. "I heard those awful men but only when it was too late for me to help you. I didn't have a gun, so I didn't dare to make a move until they had gone, taking you with them."

"Yes?" pressed Brennan. "And then?"

The girl drew a deep breath, shivered. "I couldn't arouse Frank. I'm afraid he's—he's dead."

"No," said Brennan with assumed confidence. "Just stunned. He'll be all right."

"Your saying that helps. When I couldn't do anything for him I knew I had to trail those killers, and I did."

"You trailed us on foot?" marvelled Brennan. "Then somebody caught you?"

"Taggart. He came from the direction of our camp. His horse was wringing wet. He came up—"

Brennan interposed. "I see. He got to the camp real early, saw that you were gone and flogged after his henchmen."

"He came up behind me while I was watching those two killers drop you over this rim. I trusted him and believed he'd help me, so I blurted out, 'Sherm, shoot those men. They robbed Frank and took Alf away and they're going to kill him.'

"I can never describe the expression that crossed Taggart's face. Oh, it wasn't human any more. It was—well, he grabbed me and flung me up across his saddle, and loped to meet the two men and—"

"And they decided you must die, too!" snapped Brennan. "Hope, I want to show you something."

He led her to the sandstone rock under the ledge and pointed out Red Slater's message. As she read the words and realized what they meant, her eyes misted.

"So now we know the truth about the horse steal," she said. "But what good will that do us? Or Red?"

Brennan's own eyes were bleak, his face stony. Could it be that this wonderful girl, so filled with the joy of living, was to die here with him? No! He must win out. Must!

"There's some hope for us," the cowboy said. "Hugo Wentworth said he'd have men hunt for the fellow I met on the pass—the one they call Jake Dorgan. Still, that hunt began almost two weeks ago and it would seem as if the H W punchers have given up. When Frank wakes up, he won't remember what happened, nor will he have any idea where we are. He can't help us. But we're going to get out of this trap—somehow!"

He noticed the rope which Jake and Burl had cut at the rim to give Brennan a hard fall. "That rope," he said. "It's the one thing they overlooked—and how they'll wish they hadn't!"

CHAPTER VI
Life at Stake

THE rope proved to be about thirty feet long, approximately the depth of the hole, but Brennan realized that even if he could hurl a loop almost straight up, he could not possibly noose a rock or a stump on the rim above, so with feverish urgency he again scouted the prison.

At no point could a man, without the necessary equipment, climb the wall. But at one place, about twenty feet above the floor, there was a narrow, jutting ledge, and growing from that rock base was a small scrub

pine. If Brennan could noose that little pine, and if it would hold firm—!

Anxiously he scanned the rim above the ledge. Useless to get to the ledge unless after reaching it there was something he could noose on the rim. Hope, realizing what he had in mind, cried:

"See that little boulder up there? But I'm afraid no rope will stick on it."

"This rope has *got* to stick on it!"

Expert roper though he was, this was the most difficult stunt the cowboy had ever attempted. Breathless and expectant, Hope cheered him on. Seven unsuccessful attempts to noose the little pine. Then, at the eighth cast, the upflung noose rose above the tree and settled down over it. Brennan pulled it snug and Hope exulted:

"Good man! Only a rodeo roper could have done that."

Brennan grinned. "Heck, any range cowboy could have done better. Unfortunately, the hard part's still ahead."

How very true this was he soon realized. The tree held and he climbed to the narrow shelf. Yet, standing on that narrow, dangerous ledge and attempting to throw a rope above him, to noose an object which he could not see, seemed impossible.

From the bottom of the hole, however, Hope directed Brennan's efforts.

"About one foot farther to the right this time, Alf. That was too far. Try again. Now you're to the left of the rock. Yippee! You've got it!"

Brennan tested the rope and it held firm. He climbed upward, thrust his head cautiously above the rim and had his look. Assured that his enemies were nowhere in sight, he pulled himself to solid ground and looked down. By stepping up on a huge rock, Hope had been able to grasp the dangling rope and she began to climb. A wild headiness ran through Brennan as he helped her out of the trap, but he spoke practically.

"This trail runs west into Hugo's Hole, Hope. I want you to take it, get home as quick as you can and—"

Hope cut him off. "What are you going to do? I think I know and I won't let you try to do it alone."

"Good gosh, Hope. Those curs slugged Frank, stole your money, and tried to kill you. I'm thinking of Red Slater, too. You be a good girl and go along."

"You've done enough," she argued. "Both of us'll try to get home. Come on."

It was hard to resist the pleading in her lovely eyes, but Brennan shook his head.

"No. Horse tracks show that all three men rode east from here and I'm going after them."

"You've got nothing but a rope for a weapon. Don't be crazy, Alf— Listen!"

BRENNAN could hear horses moving toward them from the east. "They're coming back," he muttered. "Quick! We must hide. There! That little thicket."

He jerked the rope loose from the boulder and was coiling it as he ran after Hope.

They were not a second too soon in taking cover. Four mounted men came in sight and halted on the rim of the chasm—Sherm Taggart, Jake Dorgan, Burl Harl. The fourth, a stranger to Brennan, small-framed, wiry and hatchet-faced, was leading Brennan's horse and the horses stolen the night before from Hope and Frank Sorrels.

Brennan's gaze fastened on the fellow's left hand. "One Thumb Bittner," he whispered to Hope.

"The fourth one named by Red," she breathed. "Glory, if only we could nail all of them."

The men were arguing and by piecing together bits of their talk, Brennan gathered that for the past ten days One Thumb Bittner and Burl Harl had been camped a half mile east of this spot.

Taggart and Bittner had kept in touch with one another through Jake and Burl, and Taggart had planned the attack. Earlier, Bittner had expected Sherm Taggart and Jake Dorgan to deliver him a sizeable bunch of stolen horses from Hugo's Hole. But all at once Hugo Wentworth had become so active, sending H W cowboys on scouting and exploring trips, that Taggart had not dared attempt the horse steal.

Taggart was in a black mood. "Like I've told you," he rasped, "old Hugo got all hopped up when that blasted Alf Brennan put a bug in his ear. Jake's a heap to blame for it, too, takin' on himself to stick up Brennan and bein' so doggone careless as to let Brennan see the H W brand on his horse.

"That was bad, for that got Hugo's curiosity fevered plenty, and he must have halfway believed Brennan's idea that Red Slater had been framed and robbed and that there must be another trail out of Hugo's Hole."

Bittner spat disgustedly. "You told me all that before. Now I say again that if H W

punchers is on the prowl they're sure to find this trail, and sure to take a squint into that death-trap in the ground there."

"I know," Taggart put in crossly. "You pointed out that the two prisoners down there have got to be killed before H W punchers find 'em alive. Alive and still able to talk. So, Burl, get down there and do the job fast. I sure got to get home before folks miss me and get suspicious."

Any man, no matter how hard-bitten, might well get squeamish about murdering a woman, Brennan thought. But Burl Harl shrugged, took a look at his six-shooter and started to lower himself into the pit.

"We got out only just in time," Hope whispered. "But, Alf, they'll hunt for us—and find us."

"Sit tight," he returned, low. "Odds are lessened by one and if I see a chance of winning I'll rush 'em. When I do, you get to the horses and ride for your life."

The girl's steady eyes looked straight into his. "No. I'll go out with you, fighting. If you were to die," her voice broke, "life wouldn't be worth living."

A shout came up out of the chasm and the three men, who had dismounted near the rim, looked down into the hole.

"They must be there! Look again," Taggart yelled.

Brennan didn't hear Burl's reply. But One Thumb Bittner eased his own wiry body over the rim and vanished. Only Taggart and Jake were left on the rim.

Brennan rose. "Please do as I begged you, Hope," he whispered, and was gone.

Streaking across the intervening space, he had almost reached the two men when Taggart pivoted and leaped away from the edge of the jump-off. Although he was tugging at his gun, for the moment Brennan let him go and crashed into Dorgan.

OVER the rim sailed Jake, a wild and frantic scream pouring out of him. Checking himself in the nick of time from following Jake, Brennan whirled and lunged at Sherm Taggart. Sherm's gun was now free and from it bellowed a shot. The slug missed and, head on, Brennan hit his enemy, knocking him backwards.

Taggart lost his weapon, yet he came up on his feet as if lifted by a powder blast.

"I've been aching for this," he gritted and slugged Brennan. "I can kill you bare-handed, and I sure will."

Brennan staggered, rocked back on his heels. Taggart pressed his advantage, driving the blond puncher toward the jump-off. Dimly Brennan was aware that Hope was there, and doing something with frantic haste. Later, he was to learn she had thrown stones at One Thumb Bittner, as he desperately tried to climb the rope, and forced him to slide down, after which she had pulled up the dangling life line.

At the moment, however, Brennan was in the fight of his life, Taggart beating him with sledgehammer blows, pounding him toward the rim by sheer brute force.

When it seemed as if Brennan could not possibly save himself, he heard Hope cry, "Look out, Alf!" and through blurring eyes he saw Taggart setting himself to bring up the punch that would end the fight. Just in time, Brennan twisted aside.

Swept off balance by his own impetus, Taggart could not recover in time. Headlong, he vanished over the rim.

Brennan staggered forward, his body one great, throbbing pain.

White-lipped, trembling, yet with a light of victory in her eyes, Hope came to him.

"It was terribly close, Alf. But it's ended now. You're hurt?"

Panting for breath, he shook his head, then pointed north where four other riders had come into sight. Obviously they had seen something, for they had spurred to a gallop. Tensely, the man and the girl watched, and then relaxed when they recognized Hugo Wentworth and, riding double with another cowboy, Frank Sorrels.

"Before they get over here, Alf, tell me what are your plans now," Hope asked.

Smiling, he looked into her eyes. "We'll let Hugo and his boys handle those four crooks. Then, I'm sure we'll recover your money. I'm hoping, too, that I'll get back my stake and what good old Red willed me as well. I'll square my debts and perhaps I can buy a little spread—just big enough for you and me, Hope."

"Just big enough for you and me?" repeated the girl. "How I'd love that! Can we run away sometimes to rodeos?"

"Rodeos?" Brennan laughed. "Of course we can. I'm not bitter about rodeos any more. This last one with you, my dearest, was so, so—"

"Wonderful," said Hope. "You made it so for me and for yourself. You've made your comeback, dear!"

Steve Crane hit D'Arcy very cleanly and very forcefully in the center of his face

Man Trap

By TOM BLACKBURN

Beautiful Beth Barton was the star of a theatrical troupe, and had to stage quite an act to win her future happiness!

IT WAS a hot night, fit for moods, temper, and trouble. Beth slammed the door of her dressing room practically in the face of a tall, frock-coated man with a vain shoulder-length mane of golden hair who was lounging with mild purpose in the passage from the wings. In the distance, penetrating thin partitions, was the boisterous sound and insidious smell of the house to which she had just played. Drunks, charlatans, cappers, gamblers, kings of Kansas society, and the entire roster of a cattle drive

which had turned its big herd of Texas beef into the loading pens on the railroad just at sunset. Abilene town at the theater.

Beth dropped her banjo into a chair and sailed her wide plumed hat across the room. The act had gone all right. Steve had said so. But he had said nothing else. Nothing of the moon gilding the wretched street outside. Nothing of the loneliness he must feel, forever a slave to the company, with no time of his own. Nothing even of the fresh, crisp, almost cool picture Beth had made before the smoky kerosene foot lamps—and this despite every inch of her costume had come from a humid trunk and had been pressed to freshness with a tiny sadiron heated over a lamp.

Steve Crane looked like a man. A meat and potatoes and moonlight kind of man. And when he was transacting business for his company, he acted like one. But the rest of the time he was impossible.

With impatient fingers, Beth unhooked a row of fasteners and her knee-length skirt fell to the floor. A skirt of crimson Skinner satin so heavy that it struck the dusty planking underfoot with actual impact. Too heavy a material to wear on-stage or off in midsummer Kansas and in spite of the way it hung from her hips and its piquant daring, not worth the discomfort of its warmth. Steve had not noticed it.

Her fingers hurried on, loosening the drawstring of her thickly flounced, six-yard underskirt and working expertly up her back to free the hooks which held the whaleboned, hour-glass mold of her jet doeskin basque locked inflexibly about her upper body. This was the theater. This was glamour, travel, glory. The devil! Sweltering, slaving, dancing silly jigs and singing throaty songs which were a mockery of the emptiness within. And all to snag a man who was a mouse.

Shrugging free of her outer garments, relishing the coolness and freedom of her chemise and pantalettes, Beth surveyed herself in the cracked mirror over her dressing table. A practical analysis by a practical girl. The conclusion was satisfactory. Her failure to stir Steve Crane was not the fault of nature.

Beside the mirror was one of the innocuous handbills Stephen Crane had printed to advertise the star of his company. "Beth Barton," the bill read, "the Handsomest Little Lady in America—"

What a choice of adjectives! Beth made a face at the bill. That was the trouble with Mr. Crane. A capable theatrical manager. He could produce a good show with astonishingly poor material. And if he didn't continually let the bummers and hams of his company make a water-boy of him, he could make respectable money out of the circuits. But he was all reserve, all agreeableness, with no insight. And no imagination.

An impish smile pulled at Beth's lips as she glanced into the mirror again. She wondered how Mr. Stephen Crane would have worded his little handbill if he could see her as she was now, somewhere near cool and a little lacy about the knees and waist and shoulders and—to be impartially critical, at least a bit better than handsome, lady or not. Mr. Crane was not, Beth decided, equipped for this kind of revelation—at least not right off—although she was irritably convinced it would be his salvation.

It was an hour until the next show. Beth flung herself down on a sagging couch, her mind taken up with Steven Crane, but exasperation prevented her from being constructive in her thinking. A mild uproar in the next dressing room penetrated her consciousness. A strident voice rapped against the thin wall. La Fleur, the moth-eaten feminine half of the veteran team of La Fleur and D'Arcy. And positively out of a medicine show, at that. A double-corseted collection of obesity, bad temper, and tin-plated imperiousness. Beth remembered how she had protested when Steve Crane had hired them and she remembered Steve's stiff answer:

"They're artists, Miss Barton. Not in your class, but artists. I'm just a stage mechanic, a businessman, but I know the value of keeping my company at a high artistic level—and happy."

ARTISTS—on a pig's back! A pair of never-beens, bumming a meal ticket and a free ride. Helpless muddlers without Steve's shrewd direction. And Steve, a bigger man and a better man than any he had ever hired, clinging stubbornly to the idea that performers were something more than people—pretty ordinary people, at that.

The uproar in the next room swelled in volume. La Fleur's ranting became distinct.

"You rattle-brained roustabout, isn't there something else you can mess up? Isn't it bad enough that you book D'Arcy and me in-

to this clapboard and tin imitation of a tank town without leaving my biggest trunk at the station and me trying to play a retching part in *The Scout's Daughter* with only half my costumes?"

La Fleur paused for breath and D'Arcy's sonorous whisky-pipe licked up where she left off.

"The way you operate this company is a blot upon the escutcheon of the theatah, Sir! I work myself into a positive transport, veritably sweating behind the ears, to create an illusion of reality for the boorish houses into which you book us, only to have you clumsily shatter it. I tell you, Crane, if that curtain bumps the platform once more at the end of my best scene, I'll take my satisfaction and leave you flat!"

"I had beefsteak for breakfast this morning," La Fleur added. "Beefsteak! But Barton got the only eggs in the house. Why should she? That banjo-playing wench is shameless. Utterly shameless, the way she ogles you. And a good banjoist could outplay her with his toes. We've all got bodies. A trooper has to have art. If you've got to have her around, why don't you marry her and get her off the boards?"

Beth, up on one elbow on the couch, waited for the answer to that one. But it didn't come. Steve Crane sidestepped it. Beth Barton was a performer, an artist, and he would sooner speak of matrimony, rings, and love to the gods.

"I've already sent for your trunk, Miss La Fleur," his voice answered quietly. "A stupid mistake, I'm afraid. And about the breakfast—I saw you didn't like yours this morning. I've already changed eating houses. A dinner from the new one will be over shortly. I hope you'll like it better. And, Mr. D'Arcy, I worked two hours on that curtain this afternoon. It's old. The pulls are in bad shape. But I'll have another try at fixing it while you're eating. I'm sorry—"

"Sorry, my uncle's eyebrows!" D'Arcy snapped. "Unless that curtain is fixed and fixed right, La Fleur and D'Arcy don't go on tonight!"

Beth had never sworn, though she thought it likely she could, and well, and she was tempted, now. Instead, she flopped back on her couch and shouted, herself.

"Hallelujah, the show's saved!"

"Barton, you hussy," La Fleur screamed from the next room, "you keep out of this! Do we have to swallow insult along with the stench of this house, Crane?"

Steve's voice murmured placatingly again. The other door closed. Beth heard an uncertain rap on her own door. Reaching onto the back of the couch, she caught up a wrapper and whirled it quickly about her.

"Come in," she said.

The door opened. Steve stood in the frame. His eyes touched the wrapper, the informality of Beth's dress, but they changed focus before the glance could be called a stare, even with hopeful imagination. Beth felt funny, inside. She thought that this was what so often made her angry with Steve Crane. A funny little inside feeling, jumping around under her stays, while Steve just looked at her as though there was a row of footlights between them, always.

That kind of look was on his face, now. A nice face, otherwise, pasted onto a nice carcass. A big frame and kindly eyes, harried and placating and gentle. Too gentle.

"Come in," she said again in exactly the right kind of voice.

Steve shook his head, a little red in the face, although Beth couldn't tell whether from embarrassment or from the heat of his encounter with his team of leads.

"No," he said carefully and with no evidence of regret that Beth could recognize. "Look, Beth—Miss Barton, it would help if you didn't interfere with La Fleur and D'Arcy. They're already pretty upset."

Beth stretched indolently on the couch.

"Tell them to go to the devil," she suggested helpfully.

Steve shook his head again in a mildly shocked denial that a man in his right mind could cope with trouble in the company so bluntly.

"I'll try to get you chicken for your dinner," he said, and he turned down the hall toward the alley door.

Beth remained motionless on the couch. Chicken was not what she wanted. And she was tired of waiting. She was tired of mildness and kid gloves and a good man making a fool of himself. She was tired of short skirts and the hard steel strings of a banjo. She was tired of coal oil smoke and seas of staring faces. Her lips flattened. She had waited long enough.

This was determination; formless as yet, but determination. She was engrossed in it when a rap sounded beside the open door.

"Come in," she called out, automatically. A step sounded. The door closed. She looked

up to see the tall, long-haired man from the hall. She felt a stab of uneasiness, but it was needless. The tall man was friendly. He was too contained to be more than that.

BETH had seen him much about the house since they had been in Abilene. A quiet, deliberate figure with cool eyes and a constant half-smile on his lips. A man who looked at a chorus row and dimpled knees and bright faces with the same carefully measured enjoyment. A handsome man, in the tradition of the territories. Almost incredibly so. More like Colonel Cody than any other Beth had seen, perhaps, but with a deeper veneer of smoothness and a higher polish than the tempestuous organizer of *Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show*. A man incapable of a leer.

"Accommodating of you, Miss," he said pleasantly. "I don't aim to intrude, but I saw your glass from the hall and I'd admire the use of it."

Beth eyed him speculatively. A citizen of Abilene, toughest trail town of them all, courting a mirror. It was preposterous enough to amuse her. She smiled, nodding permission. The man lowered his trim bulk onto the little seat before the mirror. He hitched a pair of ponderous, brilliantly plated revolvers a little to one side at his belt and removed his hat. From her quartering back view, Beth was forced to concede some justification for the man's obvious vanity over his appearance. His hair was as magnificent as his suiting and shoes were flawless. And with a woman's quick perception in head adornments, she saw his masculine raking with a comb was doing nothing for his mane.

She rose, moved by nothing more than a woman's inability to avoid improving a faulty hair-do. She crossed to the table and stopped behind the man. His eyes met hers in the mirror.

"You play that banjo mighty pretty, Miss," he offered.

"I sing, too," Beth added. The man smiled.

"You sure do," he agreed.

"You seem to catch every show," Beth said. "Which one of the acts keeps bringing you back?"

The man's brows raised.

"Don't know as I've seen them all," he said. "Mostly I'm busy out front, taking up the tickets."

Beth saw in the mirror that he wore a small badge on his vest, on which she could discern the one word, MARSHAL. She pointed at the badge.

"Picking up a little extra change, then?"

The man looked puzzled, then his eyes cleared and he chuckled.

"Not exactly, Miss," he answered. "We've got town boys in Abilene and we've got Texans just in from a long and dusty drive across the *llanos* with their beef. A kind of cussed bunch, I reckon, with no right notions of tickets and admissions and the like. I usually take over the door when a show hits town. Sort of guarantees little ladies get paid for their singing and can do their dancing without any help from the house."

He paused, scowling as his comb snagged into a tangle behind his ear.

"Here," Beth said briskly, "give me that comb."

At this moment the door swung abruptly open and D'Arcy's lank, sour-faced figure lounged in. D'Arcy's habit of entering her dressing room unannounced had irritated Beth before, but she had borne it, along with cockroaches, cinder smoke, and tank town hotels. But it made her furious, now. She did not enjoy feeling like a small boy with his hand in a cookie jar—particularly when these cookies did not interest her. And she did not care for the look in D'Arcy's eyes. Definitely triumphant; nastily gleeful. Insidious, insinuating, insufferable. Making a cheek-burner out of something as matter of fact as paring nails.

D'Arcy smiled. A slow smile, intended to build the most out of the scene before him. A supercilious, mocking smile with the consistency of a gout of mud from a passing wagon wheel.

"Excuse me!" he drawled.

The man at Beth's dressing table turned, unhurriedly, purposefully. He turned full around and he looked at D'Arcy. He said nothing. He only looked. But it was the kind of look Beth had never seen on a man's face before. A look as cold as steel. Catching it obliquely, she could still feel its impact.

D'Arcy's smile vanished. His lounging manner stiffened. His color ebbed. He started backing suddenly through the door and he reached for the panel to close it behind him. Through the narrowing opening, he spoke again. The same words, but with a different inflection. This time he meant what he said:

"Excuse me!"

The marshal of Abilene turned back to the mirror, his manner again affable. Beth stroked absently with the comb, her eyes fixed on the crown of the head before her. D'Arcy was cantankerous and chesty and it had been a startling thing to see him fold up like an empty satchel—from a look, alone.

This was some kind of man. Not a kind she would want. Not a kind which would want her. But some kind, just the same, and she thought he could be of use to her. She thought he could be of use to Mr. Stephen Crane. D'Arcy had faced this man and buckled. If Steve was to face him—if there was to be a little arranged trouble and Steve could come out on top—if it could be fixed so that nobody would suspect the fixing—

Beth began to smile. It would settle D'Arcy. It would settle La Fleur. Steve would be boss in his own company, at least. And maybe once he'd tasted that kind of blood, he'd get around to some other matters. Beth's companion saw her smile and misunderstood it.

"I sure am grateful to you for setting this wool straight, Miss," he said earnestly. "It's more trouble to a busy man than a stumble-foot pony, and that's a fact."

"You could whack it off," Beth answered, with half her mind on the thought and the other half making swift plans. The man shook his head.

"I don't reckon," he disagreed. "I was fool enough to come into this part of the country wearing it long and it seems as though I'll have to leave it that way now till somebody lifts it off of me."

"Why?"

The man turned to look at her.

"Because I don't reckon anybody would recognize me right off, without the wool, now."

"And that's important?"

The man smiled widely.

"In my business, it is," he said.

BETH had a knack with a comb and she used her own brush on the curls at the ends. It took her the better part of half an hour, but when she was finished the marshal of Abilene had a hair-do to match the balance of his impeccable dress and magnificent physique. He rose from the table and smiled down at her.

"I figure I'm owing you, Miss."

"And I'm going to collect," Beth said purposefully. "There's a man."

"There always is, with a little lady like you," the marshal said with a vague regret. "Maybe the owner of this show?"

Beth nodded.

"I'm not going to explain," she went on hurriedly, "but there's something I want you to do—"

The rush of her plan was halted by the sudden inward swing of the door again. D'Arcy had returned. Steve Crane was with him. A subtly different Steve. A little more flat in the back. A little more stiff about the mouth. Considerably more fiery of eye.

"There you are, Crane," D'Arcy gloated. "I took the lie you tossed at me when I hunted you down just to see your face when I brought you in here. There's your lily. There's your unspotted blossom. Keeping company without the decency to get out of the theatah, first!"

Steve turned on D'Arcy.

"I told you—" D'Arcy continued. Beth saw Steve's hands knot up. D'Arcy did not. "I told you what she was—"

"And once was enough!" Steve thundered with astonishing volume. "Get out!"

D'Arcy grinned in anticipation and assumed the truculence usually so effective with his employer. Beth winced. This was certainly not as she had planned it. Steve would turn peacemaker, now. He'd slide into his shell and pour oil and she'd not be able to use her plan—the plan she had not had time to confide to the marshal of Abilene.

But Steve Crane did not pour oil. Instead, he hit D'Arcy very cleanly and very forcefully in the center of his face. D'Arcy's feet left the floor. He made a carom from the jamb of the door and slid to a sitting position on the floor with his back against the wall and his eyes very dazed. La Fleur, drawn by the commotion, ran into the room. She took in the situation at a glance and charged toward Steve, screaming invective at the top of her lungs.

"Shut up!" Steve roared, and he did to her with a look what the marshal of Abilene had done to her partner with a similar one. La Fleur subsided and bent over D'Arcy to help him to his feet. The marshal chuckled softly and glanced down at Beth.

"Show people sure get along, don't they, Miss?" he asked.

Steve wheeled on the tall man with the golden hair, then. He wheeled and stalked forward, his fists still balled tightly.

"Nobody comes backstage in my company,"

he said raggedly. "You get out of here, too!"

Hoods came down over the marshal's eyes. An involuntary, habitual flicker, Beth thought, but it gave her no consolation.

"The little lady was merely brushing my hair," the marshal offered softly.

"Merely!" Steve Crane exploded. "Merely! I said, get out of here!"

Swinging swiftly forward, he seized the marshal by the point of one wide shoulder and by the sag of the heavy belt from which hung the two gleaming guns.

"Steve!" Beth cried. "Steve, no! I didn't get a chance to—"

But Mr. Stephen Crane was mad as blue devils and he didn't hear her. He swung his weight and the marshal of Abilene went through the door, upright, but with considerably less grace than Beth thought possible in a man of his build. Steve growled again at La Fleur and D'Arcy. They scuttled out after the marshal. Steve kicked the door shut. He kicked it shut hard and caught both of Beth's arms.

"Pack your bag," he growled. "You're getting out of here, too! I'm fed up pretending I like putting you on show. This was the last straw—leaving you where a pistol-toting backwards Romeo could trouble you. You're through with boards and dressing rooms, Beth Barton. You're—you're—blast it, you're beautiful!"

It wasn't so hard from here on. Beth had rehearsed a thousand times what she would do if this time ever came. All she had to do now was to let herself go. Steve's flush returned and his hands tightened up again, but he was no longer angry. And right in the middle of a bang-up second performance, a timid knock sounded on the door. La Fleur's voice came cautiously through the panel.

"It's a message for Miss Barton."

Steve crossed, opened the door, and took a small, baby blue calling card from La Fleur's hand. He glanced at it, scowled, and boldly turned it over to read a message written on the back. Finally he handed it to Beth.

He looked a little stunned, very unsure of himself, and considerably surprised.

"Remind me to ask the name of the doorman at the next house we play," he murmured.

Beth glanced at the card. The written message was uppermost.

"I reckon we're even, now, Miss," it read. Beth turned the card over slowly. The letters printed there leaped up at her with breath-taking impact.

MR. JAMES BUTLER HICKOCK
(WILD BILL)

Tank town legends and sagas of the short grass rushed in at her. Quiet stories of the most dangerous man in the West. Gunsmoke obituaries written by an emotionless human machine who could not bear the touch of another's hands upon his person.

This was her Cupid! This was the trap she had baited. Beth Barton closed her eyes weakly. When she opened them, it was with the realization that no man is emotionless and that there was a heart within the marshal of Abilene town. He had been right. They were even, now.

Steve was within reach. She grabbed him and she kissed him, hard, before he backslid again so far as to start wondering whether he should ask her first or not.

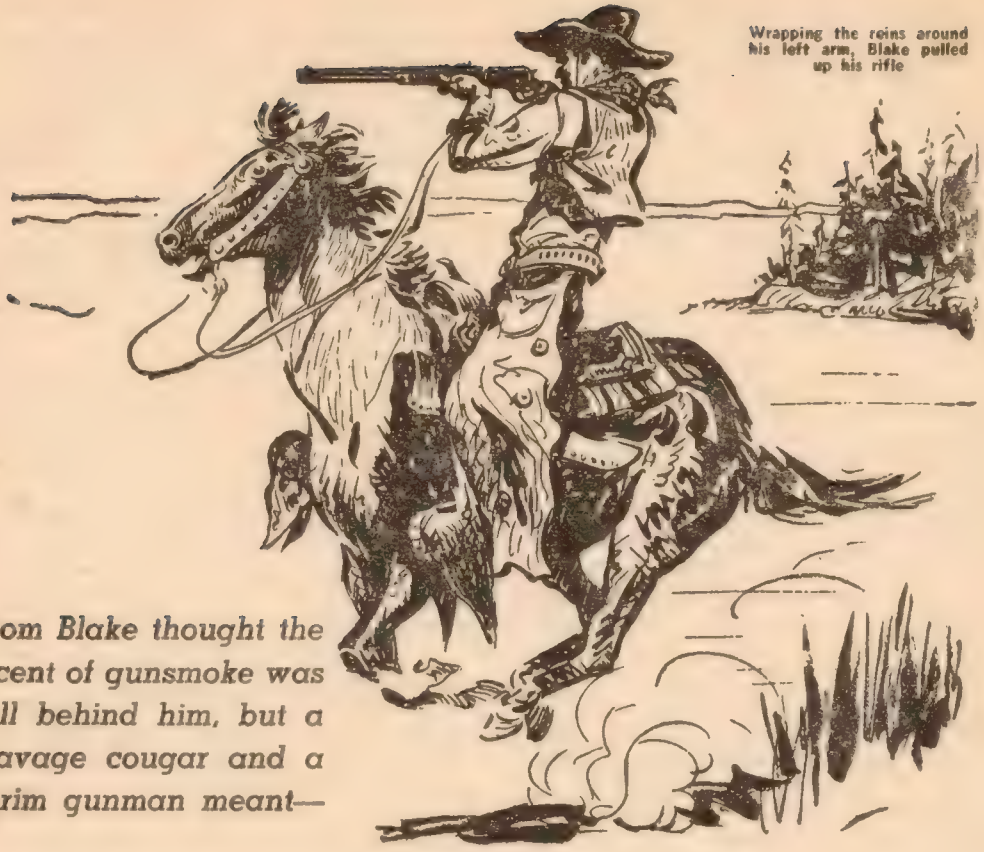
Next Issue: LOST VALLEY ROUNDUP, by Harold F. Cruickshank

Tired Kidneys Often Bring Sleepless Nights

Doctors say your kidneys contain 15 miles of tiny tubes or filters which help to purify the blood and keep you healthy. When they get tired and don't work right in the daytime, many people have to get up nights. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder. Don't neglect this condition and lose valuable, restful sleep.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may also cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Adv.)



Wrapping the reins around his left arm, Blake pulled up his rifle

Tom Blake thought the scent of gunsmoke was all behind him, but a savage cougar and a grim gunman meant—

Bullets for the Deputy

By ANDREW BRONSON

DUST rose in little puffs from beneath the horse's hoofs as Tom Blake rode slowly along the single street of the cowtown. It was a warm summer morning and there were few people on the plank walks that lined either side of the street. Down in front of the square adobe building that was the sheriff's office, a stocky middle-aged man was sitting in the shade idly whittling on a stick.

Blake halted his roan in front of the office and swung out of the saddle. A lean, tall man, he moved with the casual grace of a big cat. His range clothes were worn but of good quality, the gun in his holster was free of dust, as though it had been recently and carefully wiped off. He was a young man but he looked older than his years.

He glanced at the hitchrail baking in the hot sun, then led the roan over and ground-hitched the horse in the shade at the side of the building. The middle-aged man with the sheriff's star pinned to his shirt nodded as he watched this performance, then resumed his whittling.

"Mornin', stranger." The sheriff's voice was friendly. "Welcome to this collection

of badly built shacks that calls itself Sageville. I'm Sheriff Jim Danton, and I might say without undue modesty, the best dang lawman within fifty miles in any direction as the crow walks—seeing as I'm the only one around."

"The handle is Tom Blake," Blake said. "But why as the crow walks?"

"Too hot for flying," said Sheriff Danton, his keen blue eyes studying Blake. "I see that you have recently killed a man and, overcome with remorse, you have come to turn yourself over to the Law."

Blake stood motionless, gazing at the sheriff, his eyes hard and his right hand close to the butt of his gun.

"Dad!"

The voice came from inside the open door of the sheriff's office. It was soft and sweet and decidedly feminine. Then a girl appeared and stood there in the doorway, slender and young and blond. She smiled at Blake and it was like some strange magic relaxing the tension that had hung over him all back through the hot, weary miles he had traveled since sun-up.

"You mustn't mind Dad," she said. "He was just fooling, Mr. Blake. He likes to try and startle people by saying things such as he just said to you. Ever since he read those stories about 'Sherlock Holmes' he's been trying to act like a detective instead of the nice old sheriff he really should be."

"Aw, shucks, Joan!" protested the sheriff. "Now you've done gone and spoiled all the fun." Danton grinned at Blake. "But she's right, Blake. I was just foolin'. I don't know a thing about you."

"A trick like that might be risky, Sheriff," Blake said. "Suppose you were to accuse a hombre who had killed a man right recent? He might shoot first and talk about it afterward."

"Never worried much about that." Jim Danton continued whittling. "Folks around here didn't elect me sheriff because I was pretty. Suppose you draw down on me just friendly like, Blake."

BLAKE'S hand flashed to his holster, but before his hand touched the butt of his gun the knife and stick were on the ground and the sheriff had him covered with a Colt. Danton had not moved from his seat on the bench. Blake considered himself swift, but it was the fastest draw he had ever seen in his life.

"He also does card tricks," Joan said. "And can make coins disappear. Put your guns away and stop playing now, boys."

Like a little boy who had just been given a lecture by his mother the sheriff thrust his gun back into the holster and picked up the knife and stick.

"Just like her mother used to be," Danton said softly. "Always bossin' me around and makin' me like it. The man she marries shore better have a will of his own."

"Dad!" protested Joan. "I'm sure Mr. Blake isn't the least bit interested in my qualifications as a bride."

Blake looked at her, conscious of her beauty. He heard hoofbeats—someone riding along the street—but he did not even glance in the direction of the sound. He noticed that Joan's eyes were wide and the deep blue of the Western skies. She was dressed in a shirt and riding skirt.

The sheriff glanced out at the rider on the street. Danton closed his knife blade with a snap. He tossed the stick away and rose to his feet, no longer casual and friendly.

"Ed Caxton," Joan said, staring beyond Blake, and there was something strange and bitter in her voice. "There may be trouble, Dad."

"There usually is when Caxton is around," said Danton.

Blake turned and stood staring at the man riding up on the bay. Caxton was big and dark, and his hand on the reins was tight and cruel. The bay wore a spade bit, and the horse did not look like it had a hard mouth.

No one spoke as Ed Caxton rode up to the hitch rail fast and reined the bay to a sliding stop. The big man was scowling as he swung out of the saddle. He tied the reins to the rail and walked over to the sheriff.

Before Danton realized his intention Caxton lashed out with a hard right. The blow landed squarely on the sheriff's chin and knocked him flat. Joan uttered a startled gasp as she stood in the doorway watching.

"That will teach you to talk about me behind my back," Caxton growled. "And I don't care if you are the Law around here, nobody can say what you did about Ed Caxton."

"Wrong," said Blake softly, stepping in front of the big man as Joan rushed to her father and helped him to his feet. "I was just tellin' these folks I heard a loud mouthed

blowhard here named Ed Caxton was a rustler, horse thief and just plain polecat. But now I'm apologizin' to the polecat."

"Why—why—you—you—" Caxton's face turned crimson with fury. In his anger he made a mistake. He reached out and tried to grab Blake.

Blake hit him with a right to the jaw and a left to the body. Caxton swung wildly, just missing Blake's head. Blake landed a left just above the belt and followed with a right to the face that had the big man groggy.

Joan had helped the sheriff to his feet. Now they stood watching the fight. Up and down the street the citizens of the town discovered a battle was going on and hurried toward the sheriff's office.

Blake and the big man closed in with fists flying. Caxton landed a hard punch in Blake's ribs. Then Blake came up with a blow that hit the big man on the chin. It was a terrific punch. Caxton dropped to the ground, rolled over and sprawled there unconscious.

Blake turned away, breathing heavily, looked at Danton and grinned.

"I shore am glad to meet you, Blake," said the sheriff with twinkling eyes. "Caxton had that comin' to him for a long time. He's been tryin' to rule the roost around here, but this is the first time he's had gumption enough to get tough with me."

"What have you been saying about him, Dad?" Joan asked. "You must have said something. Otherwise he'd never have walked right up and hit you like he did."

The sheriff glanced at the crowd that had gathered, then frowned and shook his head.

"We won't talk about that now, Joan," he said. Danton stepped forward as Caxton moaned and then sat up. "All right, folks. The fight's over. Run along and tend to yore business if you've got any."

THERE was authority in the sheriff's voice and the citizens of the town started to drift away. Ed Caxton lumbered to his feet. He stood for a moment glaring at Blake and the sheriff like an angry grizzly.

"I'll get you for this," Caxton growled. "That goes for you and that new deputy of yours, Sheriff."

"He's not a—" began Danton, and then broke off as Blake stuck an elbow in his ribs. "He's not worryin' any. Are you, Blake?"

"Not any," said Blake calmly. "We'll be around, if you're lookin' for us, Caxton."

Caxton cursed under his breath and went to his horse. He untied the reins and swung into the saddle. He rode away without looking back and disappeared around a bend of the road beyond the lower end of the town.

"And there goes a man who is dearly loved by one and all," said the sheriff. "Come on inside, Blake."

Danton led the way into the office with Joan and Blake following him. The sheriff lowered himself in a swivel chair at a battered desk. Joan seated herself near her father. At a nod from the girl, Blake took another chair.

"Just who is Ed Caxton?" Blake asked.

"A rancher," answered the sheriff. "Owns the E C Connected. We been havin' trouble with rustlers around here durin' the last few months. There are four other ranches besides Caxton's spread and they all have been losin' stock. I suspect Caxton might have something to do with the rustling, and I reckon I said so in front of the wrong man."

"What do you mean by that?" Blake asked, as the sheriff paused.

"Was talkin' to Adam Harper last night. He runs the general store here in town. Harper's an old friend of mine, and he wouldn't talk, but we were in the saloon, and the bartender might have been listenin'."

"So Caxton came here this morning to beat you up for callin' him a rustler," said Blake thoughtfully. "That could be the act of a hot tempered or a guilty man. Take yore choice, Sheriff."

"Tell Tom about the mountain lion, Dad," Joan said.

Blake looked at her, finding the way she had casually called him by his first name very attractive. He had always known that, somewhere and sometime, he would find a girl who meant everything to him, and there was no doubt in his mind this was the place and Joan was the girl.

"What about the mountain lion?" he asked.

"There's one loose back in the hills," Danton said. "It has been killin' stock. I've been out there and read sign and seen steers that the lion killed. Hunted for it, too, but never had any luck in findin' it." The sheriff frowned. "Why didn't you want me to tell Caxton you weren't my deputy, Tom."

"Because I rode into town lookin' for a job," Blake said. "And I'm hopin' you can use a man, Sheriff."

For a moment Danton hesitated. Blake

was almost sorry he had spoken. It was so easy to remember the roar of the guns, the smell of powdersmoke, the thud of falling bodies. And always that chance that he would be next. Sitting there the old wounds seemed to burn and throb again. A man could not live as he had done for the last five years and not be hurt. There were no notches on his gun, but there could have been.

Dodge City, Aberdeen, other cities and towns drifted through his memory, and with them always the faces behind the flaming guns. Men hating him because he was Tom Blake, simply that and nothing more.

His gaze drifted to Joan. Her hair was like spun gold in the sunlight that poured in through a window. She smiled at him and the faces and the memories drifted away as the gun smoke had vanished on the wintry winds.

"A job as my deputy," Danton said as though still thinking it over. "Never figgered I needed one to side me until now. But I'm wondering—" The sheriff paused and frowned.

"Wondering what, Dad?" Joan asked.

"There's men in this town I never saw before," said Danton. "Hard-faced hombres who must have drifted in right recent. I saw them in the crowd that was just watchin' the fight, but what's more important is they saw Caxton hit me and knock me down. Me, the sheriff, and it was Tom Blake who licked Caxton, not me."

BLAKE had to agree with the accuracy of the sheriff's estimate.

"You're right," he said. "A lawman's reputation means a lot. I know and Joan knows that you've got plenty of courage, Sheriff. Know too that I've never seen a man faster on the draw, but your outlaws and gunmen always want to believe the Law is not dangerous. Seein' Caxton knock you down, gives them a chance to think that way."

"Such men strike in the dark unless they're really shore," Danton said. "I don't want a bullet in my back." The sheriff came to a decision. "You're hired as my deputy, Tom. But you'll be carryin' your badge in your pocket until you need it."

"Suits me." Blake's hand went into a pocket of his levis, and touched a bit of metal there. "Sometimes a deputy can work better under cover, Sheriff."

Danton swore Blake in as his deputy and mentioned the salary. To Blake the money wasn't really important, though he didn't say so. In a money-belt around his waist was nearly ten thousand dollars that he had saved in order to buy a little ranch of his own, sometime, and settle down. He had earned that money by hard work through the dark years.

Joan left shortly after that, and Blake learned the sheriff and his daughter lived in a house a mile beyond the north end of the town. He had been invited to have supper with them that evening. He had accepted gladly.

"About these strange men in town," Blake said when he was alone with the sheriff. "You said all of the ranches have been losin' stock. Suppose the rustlers figgered on makin' one big clean-up and then gettin' out of this part of the country?"

"I thought of that," said Danton. "And if Caxton is bossin' the whole thing he might play it sort of cute."

"How?" asked Blake.

"By hirin' a bunch of strangers to steal the cattle," said the sheriff. "If some of the E C Connected stock also turns up missin' and Caxton is still around it'd be right hard to prove he had anythin' to do with it. He could get his share of the cash later when the stolen cattle was sold."

"Where is the E C Connected?" Blake asked.

"Over south near the hills where that mountain lion has been roamin' around," said Danton. "Why?"

"I aim to ride out there and hunt for that lion if you'll lend me a fresh horse," said Blake. "But that cougar won't be the only thing I'm huntin'!"

An hour later Blake rode southward toward the hills. He had learned he was heading into brush country so he was now wearing leather chaps. He also had on a vest, and there was a rifle in his saddle boot.

He found the E C Connected without any trouble, and scouted around. He was hidden back among some trees when he saw six hard-faced men riding toward the ranch from Sageville. They passed close enough for Blake to get a good look at their faces, and he was sure he had seen all of them in the crowd in town after the fight.

"The sheriff shore guessed right," Blake muttered when the men had gone. "Those hombres are workin' with Caxton all right. Not much I can do around here. Reckon

I'll go look for that mountain lion."

He spent hours riding back through the hills hoping to find some sign of the cougar, but failed. He was riding across a clearing when a rifle roared and a bullet whistled by his left ear.

Blake glanced back over his shoulder. Four riders were trailing him, and he was sure they were the gunmen working for Caxton. He snatched the rifle out of the sheath and then did the unexpected. He wrapped his reins around his left arm, and then headed straight for the approaching horsemen, the rifle butt against his shoulder.

He fired and saw a man tumble out of the saddle. Again the rifle roared and a second man dropped. Bullets were coming in Blake's direction but most of the men were using six-guns and he was still beyond their range. He fired a third time and missed, then again and missed. He was close now and the two men with the six-guns were getting the range. Their bullets came close.

"I better get this thing finished or I'll never live to tell about it," Blake muttered.

He fired and another gunman went down. The last man died from a fifth bullet from Blake's Winchester. He saw the riderless horses all turn and head back in the direction of the ranch.

"That makes four men who won't do any more rustlin'," said Blake. "Reckon Caxton will be workin' kind of short handed."

HE EXAMINED the men, found they were all dead and left them where they had fallen. Someone from town could take care of the bodies later. There wasn't as much brush as he had expected, so he removed his chaps and vest and placed them in his saddle roll.

He rode back into the hills. He was just about to give up the hunt for the mountain lion when he heard the cry of a cougar. He headed in the direction of the sound. Up on a ledge Blake saw the tawny beast crouching, gazing down at something on the rocks directly below.

Blake couldn't see what the lion was after, but he wanted that beast. He dismounted and groundhitched the horse. With the rifle in his hand, he started climbing up to the place where the mountain lion still lingered. Halfway up Blake's foot slipped. He would have fallen if he had not let go of the rifle and grabbed a ledge with both hands. The Winchester dropped down into a gulch below.

He climbed on up, trying to get close enough to kill the mountain lion with his six-gun. The cougar had not moved, he was still crouched over something below him. Blake got closer and then halted, horror sweeping over him.

Lying motionless on the ground beneath the cougar's ledge was Joan Danton, apparently unconscious from a fall. The mountain lion was getting ready to spring at her.

On the other side of the big cat Ed Caxton appeared abruptly. Blake had his gun half drawn when he saw the other man. Caxton's hand was also on the butt of his Colt. The two men stood motionless staring at each other. Blake realized that if he didn't shoot the mountain lion it would spring on the girl, but if he did shoot it would give Caxton the chance to kill him.

"Looks like I got you!" Caxton boasted. "If you fire at me, the gal dies."

The lion whirled at the sound of the big man's voice. With a snarl the cougar sprang —not at Joan—but at Caxton. It landed clawing and scratching and biting. Caxton uttered a wild yell of terror as he and the cougar went tumbling over the ledge to go hurtling down into the gulch below. There was a thud, a snarl and then silence.

Blake peered over the ledge. Caxton was sprawled there motionless, and from the way his neck was twisted there was no doubt he was dead. The mountain lion snarled again. Blake drew his gun and killed the lion.

Joan sat up weakly a few moments later. She breathed a sigh of relief, when she found that Blake had been holding her in his arms, and snuggled back against his shoulder.

"Caxton kidnaped me," she said. "Brought me back here in the hills. He was going to hold me a prisoner but I got away. I stumbled and fell and must have knocked myself unconscious. Where is Caxton, Tom?"

"Dead," said Blake. "And so are most of those gunmen he had workin' for him."

A few moments later Sheriff Danton appeared. He had been searching for his daughter. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw Joan and Blake.

"Was hopin' you might find her, Tom," Danton said. "But I've shore been worried. Stopped off at the E C Connected with the posse that's waitin' down below. Couple of Caxton's men confessed that outfit had been doing the rustlin'."

"I know," said Blake. He and the girl

(Concluded on page 90)

Branding Fire Song Book

By TEX BROWN

HOWDY there neighbors! Got all the strings on your guitars? Got all the frogs out of your throats? Yes? Then somebody throw a few more chips on the old Branding Fire, and we'll settle down and give the coyotes a run for their money. They ain't the only ones that can lift their voices and yell at the moon. No sir, not when there's a bunch of singing waddies around.

Lots of people say that cowpokes sing to the cattle to soothe them, but after all the singing of various kinds that I've heard around campfires, I've got my doubts. Of course, there might be some truth to the belief that cows have got funny ideas about what kind of sounds are pretty and which ones ain't. After all, they moo at each other, don't they? And they beller and go on with a lot of mighty unpretty sounds. But they seem to be contented, or at least satisfied with the noises they make. I never heard a cow practicing up to improve her voice, so she must be satisfied.

And then there's another angle. And that is, if folks really had to decide between hearing a cow beller and some folks singing certain current songs, I reckon some of 'em would have a hard time deciding.

Give Me the Old Songs Every Time

This ain't to say that there ain't those who like the present day music. There must be, because there's all kinds of tastes. I've even known one feller that liked Chinese music. Of course, he was Chinese, but it just goes to show you.

But give me the old songs every time, instead of the present day ones. I reckon I'm old fashioned, but I like a little tune with my music, and a tune is what some present day songs has got everything else but.

There might be a similarity between a lot of the old songs, and maybe the words don't always come out with the same number of accents that there are in the music. And maybe the grammar ain't always Oxford English. It could be that the boys who write the songs split an infinitive once in a while.

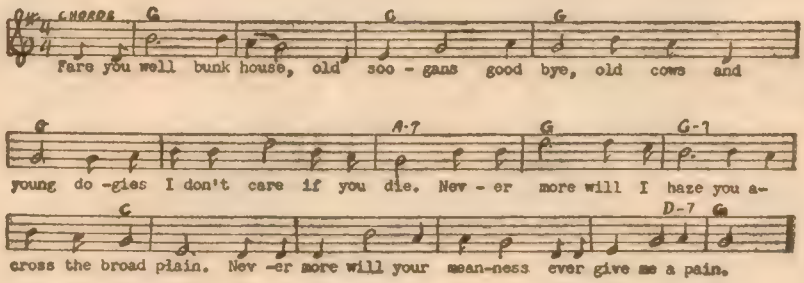
Well, down here where the songs are made it ain't a crime to split an infinitive, if you can prove that you did it in self defense. And you can also say "The sun shines for you and I" in a song if you want to.

I had me a song writing friend in one of the bunkhouses I lived in once, and I was trying to explain that you and I business to him. I told him don't use I in a case like that unless you could use I without using the "you." To see whether it's all right to say the sun shines for you and I, leave out the "you" and put it this way, "The sun shines for I." That proves you should have used "me" instead of "I."

He said, "I ain't writing this song for you, I'm writing it for me, and if I want to call myself I, then who's to stop me?"

Nobody stopped him, and now he's in Hollywood, making big money writing songs full of split infinitives and the wrong you and I's in 'em, and me with all my fourth grade education, well, I'm still sitting around the bunkhouse. Sometimes I turn on the radio and hear him singing, "The birds sing for you and I." It still don't sound right, but I guess nothin' can be done about it.

GOODBYE TO THE BUNKHOUSE



2.
Gonna hang up my saddle, my boots and my quirt,
Never more will I sleep in the mud and the dirt.
I'm packing my warbag and going to town,
I'm gonna get married and then settle down.

3.
Oh, her hair is like moonbeams that shine through the trees,
And her eyes are the blue of the big rolling seas,
Her teeth are all pearly, her skin snowy white,
And she's marrying me on Saturday night.

4.
We'll make us a home where the bright river flows,
And I'll follow her wherever she goes.
She teaches the school, down by Willow Bend,
And when we're married my roaming will end.

5.
Fare you well, soggy flapjacks from the cook's greasy spoon,
Goodbye rain and sunshine, and stampedes neath the moon,
Fare you well dust and heat and thirst on the trail,
Goodbye drink and fighting and landing in jail.

6.
I'm leaving tomorrow and saying farewell,
And giving up riding—well, at least for a spell,
I've had all the punching a man can endure,
I'll never come back—but I can't say for sure.

Ned grabbed desperately for his gun and fired before Floyd could fire again. Ned made the shots count

Gun Serenade

By CLEE WOODS

To save his sweetheart and her Dad, Ned Roebuck does some straight thinking—and backs it up with his six-shooter!

IT WAS a night for a cowboy to see his girl. Moonlight gleamed through the tall, majestic lodgepole pines. The waterfall sang its night song from the side of the mountain half a mile away. The June breeze was warm against the cheek.

Ned gave Sugar her head and let the mare pick her way through the thousand

pines. The moonlight shone on the golden sorrel's sleek neck and shoulders as they passed again and again from shadows to light. Ned's slim body bent in the saddle with agile grace as Sugar took him beneath a low limb of an Englemann spruce.

Then they came to the edge of the woods and Ned halted. He had to leave Sugar here and make the rest of the trip afoot. He tingled inside with both joy and uncertainty. This was the home ranch of the big Z Bar 80 and Ned was the bronco peeler for the Circle Star. There was no love lost between the two outfits, and even a chance meeting of Circle Star cowboys and Z Bar 80 riders in town might lead to a fight. Three different times there had been killings, too, but two of these had happened on Ganyon Creek, disputed range between them.

So there was good reason for Ned to hitch Sugar in the shadow of a fir tree, where the aspens formed a protecting rim before the grass began. He could see the roofs of house and barn and woodshed off among the trees, still long rifle range away.

But Ned was looking for another roof, one tucked away beneath some cottonwoods well back from the big house. That was where Wilma lived. Where his girl breathed this sweet Oregon air and put those small feet of hers on the earth, and how he loved every inch of ground her feet touched.

She'd promised to meet him out back of the big rocks that had rolled down from the mountainside generations ago and stood up in the open, chuck-wagon size and covered with moss and wild flowers.

It was like a beautiful thing from some beautiful book. Seeing Wilma up close for the first time a year ago. Talking to her and hearing her low, throaty voice say his name. Seeing her again at a dance. The very touch of her made something come up inside him till it hurt. Then he had met her here a month ago and again last week. There had been only those two secret little meetings.

The wonder of it all throbbed through him now as he stole toward the rocks. The enchantment of such a night. The glory of such a girl. And the fright that shook him until he trembled. Because tonight he was going to tell her about his plans for the little horse ranch on the 320 he'd just filed on back on the head of Little Bluewater River.

And tonight he was going to ask her to go with him and pick out the site for the three-room log cabin—and stay with him there forever.

NED might have waited a little longer and saved a little more money, except for one thing. Floyd Talbot, her dad's boss, was pestering the girl to marry him. He was a big, glum, stubborn man of thirty-odd, hard on his cowboys and cruel to any horse he rode. He nursed deep hatreds, once they embedded themselves deep within his brutelike body.

On rare occasions, Floyd would go into an insane rage. At such times nobody dared cross him. He'd had such a spell of temper the day his father's will was read. The will gave him and Duncan, his brother by adoption, equal shares in the ranch. Floyd wanted it all, on the ground that the spendthrift Duncan would only run through his part of the ranch. Besides, Floyd had never conceded the adopted brother's right to share with him, a blood son.

Just ahead of Ned were the three big rocks. They stood up from the sloping land like things alive, with the moonlight beating on their backs. He stopped, listened. All was quiet down at the big house and at Wilma's home, too. Her dad was the Z Bar 80's blacksmith.

Ned Roebuck thought of himself and Wilma as having no part of the hatred which the two big ranches bore each other. He didn't hate the Z Bar 80. Wilma didn't hate the Star Circle. He and Wilma were on enemy ranches by accident, and he wanted to take her away.

He slipped up to the rocks, heart in his throat. Wilma wasn't there waiting for him. He called her name softly, but she didn't answer. That was okay, though. He'd wait.

Ned tried to frame the words he'd begin with, when he got to asking her. But nothing suited what he wanted to tell her. You just can't say in words what you feel in a sunset, or what you hear in beautiful music.

He watched for her, down across the grassy slope. Sometimes he eased out too far from the rocks. If those Z Bar 80 cowboys were to catch him here, there was no telling what they might do. It was only because he was a Circle Star man, not because they had anything special against him—unless it was his going to see Wilma.

What was keeping Wilma? She was half an hour late now. For the tenth time he looked at the big silver seven-jewel Elgin

he'd bought second hand. He'd indulged in few extravagances like that. In the nine years since he'd started wrangling at fourteen, he'd been saving his wages for that horse ranch. Since he'd seen Wilma he'd saved even more, so he could buy her a few extra things for the log house and some pretty dresses when they first started out.

The moon arched on up into the sky, and still Wilma didn't come. Lights were on down at her home yet, the little boxed house with flowers in the windows.

Uneasiness ate deep at Ned. He risked moving down toward the house. He saw lights in the kitchen and front part of the house, too. That made him still more worried.

He edged nearer and, through the kitchen window, saw Wilma's father and mother. That meant Wilma must be in the front part of the house, entertaining somebody else.

Tom Rains, Wilma's father, appeared uneasy, too. Or angry. Ned saw him move across the floor several times. A small, spare man, not at all what you'd expect a blacksmith to be.

Ned was suddenly dismayed when Wilma's fox terrier, Peanuts, rushed out at him, barking excitedly. He tried to hush the little white dog, but the animal wouldn't be hushed.

Ned had to retreat. He heard the kitchen door open, and that meant Mr. Rains was coming out to see what Peanuts was barking at. Ned flattened himself on the ground, fearful of being seen in the moonlight. That only excited Peanuts all the more, and he dashed about, nipping at Ned's heels. With each lunge, Peanuts barked more frenziedly.

Ned slapped his hat at the dog and drove him back a little. Then he crawled on through the grass that came to the top of Peanuts' back. Peanuts followed, barking constantly and occasionally lunging for another grab at Ned's heels.

Mr. Rains was out in the yard now, disturbed by the dog's excitement. Then Ned heard Wilma speaking to her father.

"Here, Peanuts, come on back here," she called laughingly. "What's got you so excited, anyway?"

Ned could tell by Wilma's voice that she wasn't as amused as she pretended. Peanuts seemed to know it, too, for he kept right after Ned.

"It must be a porcupine, or something," Wilma said to her father. "I'll fetch him back before he gets his face full of quills again."

She ran out after the dog. Thinking himself reinforced, Peanuts attacked Ned with new ferocity. Ned lay still, waited for Wilma to come within hearing.

Then he said, "It's me, Wilma. I got powerful anxious."

"I knew it must be you, Ned," she said in low voice. Aloud she said, "Why, Peanuts, all that fuss over a poor little porcupine." Then in the low tone she said, "Get on back to our rocks. I'll be there as soon as he leaves."

"Who leaves?"

She didn't answer him promptly. Ned's hungry eyes were on her. She was so petite and trim in that white dress with the little blue flowers. Her eyes were so blue, her face so sweet. She laughed softly at the rage of her little dog, and her laugh was like music to Ned.

Finally she did answer with, "Duncan Talbot, that's who."

"Oh!" Ned said.

Wilma gathered Peanuts into her arms and hurried back with him before her father reached the spot. Rains seemed to hesitate when Wilma scolded Peanuts again about attacking a baby porcupine. But Rains went back into the house with Wilma.

SO IT was Duncan Talbot, huh? Not Floyd this time. The reckless Duncan who, at 28, had already had two wives and was now engaged to some rodeo trick rider. Duncan didn't know about Ned. He was trying to take her away from the sullen, selfish Floyd who hated him as an intruder.

Ned was stunned by the sudden realization that he might have to fight both Floyd and Duncan in order to get Wilma. Ned started to crawl back to the three rocks, but he rebelled at leaving. That Duncan Talbot! Yet with all his failings, Duncan was better than Floyd. Ned changed his course back toward the house. Doubt began to jab sharp into his breast.

The front door of the house opened. Wilma's dad and Duncan Talbot came out and walked side by side toward the big Talbot home. They stopped when they were out of hearing of the house. But Ned could hear every word they said.

"Listen, Duncan," Mr. Rains said, "Wilma is young. I don't think that a man of yore age and past ought to be paying her atten-

tion. The same goes for Floyd, too—only more so."

That was Mr. Rains through and through—forthright and sincere, taking care of his daughter, regardless of his job. It scared Ned a little, though. Wilma's dad might think she was too young to marry anybody. But she was eighteen.

Duncan's reply was just as characteristic of him—impetuous and willful. "That's for Wilma to say, Rains," he said. "And she likes me. She's scared of Floyd."

Duncan started on, as if that settled the entire matter. He walked into the shadows of a little cluster of aspens, and Ned lost sight of him. Mr. Rains followed him, and Ned saw that the blacksmith had a mind of his own. Mr. Rains had a dignity that made him stiffen at Duncan Talbot's insolence.

"Yuh're wrong, Duncan," the father said positively. "Yuh've had two wives, and there's been a lot of talk about yuh otherwise. They tell me yuh're engaged right now to a rodeo trick rider. Also, yuh—"

"That's enough about me!" Duncan snapped, his temper gone. "I'll do as I please. And if yuh don't want me seeing Wilma, get off this ranch. Not even that'll stop me from seeing her, though."

That was the true Duncan Talbot—unbridled, arrogant, taking what he wanted when he wanted it. He was too egotistic to believe that any girl could resist him.

Mr. Rains held his temper, but his voice had grim determination in it when he said, "I warn yuh again, yuh better stay away."

"Threatening me, huh?" Duncan flared.

"Take it any way yuh please," Rains replied.

Duncan accepted the challenge. "All right. I'll go back right now and make Wilma tell me with her own pretty little lips that I'm welcome here any old day. Or night."

"Duncan, stay away from my house!" Mr. Rains snapped. "Before I'll see you— Well, now that yuh've shown what yuh're like, I'll kill yuh before I'll have yuh take that girl, Talbot!"

"Kill away!" Duncan scoffed.

Duncan started again for the house. Wilma had heard the heated argument by now and she was coming out toward the gate.

"Duncan, I said stay away from her!" Rains cried.

For about two seconds there was a hush. Ned barely could make out one of the two figures among the aspens and low outcroppings of rock.

Then suddenly Duncan Talbot was crying, "Don't! Don't shoot, for heaven's sake! You can't—"

A shot cut off his terrified cry. Ned saw the sudden flash of the gun in the dark shadows. He saw Duncan stagger out into the moonlight, bent over and clutching at his midriff, and topple to the ground.

It was like a rehearsed pantomime there in the moonlight, as though Duncan Talbot were on a stage merely acting out some stark tragedy. There was no sound. Not a word. Not even a moan. Ned went cold all over. Wilma, there at the gate, seemed frozen to ice. She couldn't have helped hearing that threat of her father and that one shot.

Ned's first impulse was to rush to the spot, and offer Duncan help if he still lived. Then there flashed over him the realization that if he did so, he would have to be a witness in court against Mr. Rains.

Rains had recovered from his shock. He ran to Duncan, crying, "I didn't do it, Duncan! I didn't shoot yuh. Somebody else—Oh, have I gone crazy? This thing can't be true!"

Wilma was running toward the two men. Ned knew she'd bring help quickly from the Talbot bunkhouse. He crawled away as fast as he dared go. He wasn't going to make it dead certain he'd be the state's chief witness against Mr. Rains by appearing now.

Ned hastened his crawl. He heard the commotion at the bunkhouse, telling that Wilma had arrived there with the startling news. Men shouted. Boots beat the earth. The gate slammed again and again.

Ned decided that the best thing he could do was to get back to the Circle Star. They didn't need him here, and by now he was filled with a killing dread that he would have to appear in court against Mr. Rains.

HE GOT up, intending to run. He took one step, then froze. Close beside a rock a man crouched, a big man in patched corduroy breeches and faded brown shirt. He had a six-shooter pointing at Ned. It was Floyd Talbot, the man too stingy, for all his wealth, to buy decent clothes.

"Lift yore paws," came Floyd's deep, sullen command.

"Wh—what for?" Ned stammered. "You know I didn't shoot Duncan."

"Of course yuh didn't, but yuh're going

back as a witness against the man who did—Tom Rains."

Ned never knew what made him think of it, much less ask it, but a question was breaking from his lips before he realized its import. "What—how came yuh to know I was here and head me off so quick?" he demanded.

Floyd answered promptly enough, "I was standing out in the yard at home, when I heard Duncan yell, 'Don't shoot!' and I knew he was in trouble. When I heard the shot I figured I'd better sorter circle in and not come direct—for fear I'd get shot myself. Yuh see, Rains had as good as told me to stay away from Wilma, too."

"But how come yuh don't think that I shot Duncan?" Ned asked. "How'd yuh know Mr. Rains did it?"

A criminal lawyer couldn't have done better on that one. Ned knew that by the question he was exposing himself to accusation, but it was such a startling situation he didn't stop to consider.

"Rains had told Duncan to stay away from Wilma." Floyd flared back angrily. "That's how I know Rains shot Duncan. But I even heard poor Duncan holler, 'Don't shoot, Rains!' "

"Yuh're a liar!" Ned blurted out. "Duncan never used anybody's name then. Listen, Talbot, you shot Duncan!"

"What?" Floyd shouted. "For just two cents I'd blow yore head off for that, kid. Come on, shag it back to the Rains house. Yuh're telling all those cowboys what yuh saw and heard. Tom Rains'll be lucky if they don't swing him from a limb in his own yard if Duncan dies."

Floyd took Ned's Colt and drove Ned back to the Rains yard. That startling idea again swept through Ned's mind. Floyd always had resented Duncan. No doubt he had hated Duncan until it gnawed at his mind night and day. That hate had flamed out into the open when Floyd's father's will was read, giving beyond all recall half of the ranch to Duncan.

Already the cowboys had carried Duncan to a bed in the house. Now they were knotted outside, in grave talk. Mrs. Rains and a couple of old hands were doing all they could for Duncan.

In the center of the angry cowboys was Tom Rains. He was talking excitedly, vowing over and over that he hadn't shot Duncan, although he admitted threatening him because of Wilma. The cowboys had liked the reckless Duncan, despite his shortcomings. . . .

Floyd Talbot made quick work of that kangaroo court. With the knot of enemy cowboys about him and Wilma there by her dad, holding onto his arm, Ned had to tell what he'd seen and heard. Ned himself felt the sharp animosity of these Z Bar 80 riders. More than one muttered invectives against him as he answered the sledgehammer questions of Floyd. But more than all else Ned felt the life going out of Wilma, and her chilling toward him as he condemned her dad. Let them lynch Tom Rains, or even only send him to the pen, and look where Wilma would be.

"Well, boys, there it is," Floyd finished the prosecution. "Wilma, come on in the house and help your mother with Duncan till the doctor gets here."

Wilma followed the big, bony, masterful Floyd into the house. So did Ned. He didn't want to let Wilma out of his sight. Floyd frowned at him as Ned entered the room where Duncan lay on the bed. Wilma looked as though she herself had been condemned to hang.

"Ned," she said, and the tremor in her voice made Ned go all choky inside, "you can't be of any use here. You better go home, before the cowboys turn on you, too."

"Good advice, Roebuck," Floyd added. "Here's your hogleg."

Wilma wouldn't look at Ned. But he felt her utter despair and her coldness toward him.

"All right," he said. "But—has Duncan ever gained his right mind?"

"No," Mrs. Rains answered. "A few times I thought he might, but he sank back into the stupor again. I'm afraid he's dying."

Ned holstered his six-shooter and went back into the open. The knot of cowboys was still tight around Tom Rains. Ned heard the low questions, heard Rains' angry, indignant replies. The trial was about over, and the terror in the blacksmith's voice told that he knew what the verdict was going to be. They'd hang him as soon as breath went out of Duncan.

Ned felt like fighting, like throwing down on them, regardless of how hopeless the odds were.

"Hey, Roebuck, you're not wanted here," some man from the cowboy group called.

That brought the fighting urge leaping up

more fiercely in Ned. But what chance did one man have against a dozen? They wanted to get rid of him, Wilma's boy friend, before they started stringing Rains up. He'd have to go, and the shame of it burned hot inside him. Rains was doomed, unless Wilma herself could talk them out of it. That thought made Ned turn back into the house. He strode across the floor, his footsteps deadened by the thick rag carpet.

AS HE reached the bedroom Ned stopped as though he'd hit a stone wall. There in the room Floyd had Wilma in his arms! He was kissing her, and Wilma was giving him her lips. Mrs. Rains stood by the window, crying, her slight frame rocking back and forth.

Ned just stood there, all dead inside. Then Wilma pulled away from Floyd, and Ned had never seen such despair in any eyes! Even if her father was about to get hanged, that couldn't be the way a girl looked when she was in her man's arms.

But Wilma had ordered him away. So had the cowboys outside. Ned turned as if in a daze and went through the front door, out into the yard, and past the knot of cowboys.

"You tauntin' us, Circle Star?" a Z Bar 80 man called wrathfully.

Ned hardly heard him. He knew that the longer he stayed here the greater his danger would become, but he just couldn't clear out and leave Tom Rains to hang like this.

Suddenly Wilma ran out through the room and on to the knot of cowboys. Floyd followed her outside. Neither said a word to Ned but he came back anyway. Mrs. Rains was on her way out, too, and Ned stopped her on the steps.

"How did it happen, Mrs. Rains?" Ned asked. "I mean, Wilma in his arms, like I saw."

"I can't make it out," the mother answered, half hysterically. "She's not herself." She started on, but Ned caught her arm.

"Tell me," Ned demanded, "did Floyd threaten her?"

"No, Wilma just up and told Floyd that all this had made her see where her heart was. That she loved him."

"Loved Floyd Talbot?"

"Yes, that's what she said."

Mrs. Rains wouldn't be detained any longer. She shrugged her arm loose from Ned and ran on to intercede for her husband. Ned went up onto the front porch.

"Now, now, boys," he heard Floyd saying to his men, "after all, it's my brother that's been shot. There is plenty doubt in my mind. For all we know, maybe Duncan shot himself, after Wilma turned him down cold a few minutes earlier."

"Did you turn Duncan down, Wilma?" the chief questioner asked.

"Yes, I did," Wilma replied, her voice as dead as wood.

In a flash Ned saw it all. Wilma simply couldn't love Floyd Talbot. She had walked into Floyd's arms because she knew it was the one way open to her to save her dad. Ned saw, though, that if Tom Rains' innocence were proved, Wilma would be free to tell Floyd the truth—that she loathed the very sight of him.

Ned's mind played with a wild thought. It would outlaw him, at least for the time being. But it would gain time, and he grasped at one hope. Duncan might live and then he'd tell who shot him, for he'd been looking at the man when he cried, "Don't shoot!" Ned didn't believe that Tom Rains was the man. If it was not Rains, then it had to be Floyd Talbot.

The motive was there. Floyd was crazily in love with Wilma. He was subject to fits of insane temper. It doubtless had enraged him when he discovered that Duncan was down at the blacksmith's cottage, trying to take Wilma from him. So he'd followed and watched and grabbed the chance to put the hated Duncan out of the way. Further, with Duncan dead, Floyd would be left the sole owner of the Z Bar 80. Floyd might even have been shrewd enough to foresee Wilma in his power, with her dad standing practically beneath a noose.

All this beat through Ned's brain in crazy chaos. And before his eyes every second was the sight of Wilma in Floyd's arms, letting that big brute kiss her.

Just then Floyd fanned that flaming torture hotter within Ned. Floyd called aloud to everybody, "Boys, I might as well own up to it, Mr. Rains will be my father-in-law before another two hours. I'm taking Wilma into town and getting married as soon as Duncan rests easier. Just to satisfy yourselves, though, you can keep Mr. Rains under guard till morning, and I'll send out the coroner to pronounce a verdict of attempted suicide over Duncan."

So he was keeping a club over Wilma until she married him! That settled it. Ned didn't

stop to consider his next move.

He cried, "Listen, all you clabber-brained Z Bar Eighties. I shot Duncan! He'd come here and taken my girl away from me—and I hated him anyway."

BEFORE the stunned men could move or the petrified Wilma could utter a cry, Ned broke back through the house, his surest way of escape. If only he could make it out the back door and over the fence, he'd outrun the whole mob to his horse. Not a man here had a horse ready.

But midway the living room Ned stopped cold. There was Duncan in the doorway, wild looking, eyes glassy. In a flash Ned thought of the owlhoot trail ahead, of the lonely years in exile, and all because of Floyd Talbot's fiendish plan to take a girl and own a great ranch all by himself. But still standing between Floyd and his two goals there was Duncan—if only Duncan could live long enough to talk.

Ned burst out, "Did you hear me, Duncan? I told them I shot you, just so Wilma wouldn't have to marry Floyd. She told Floyd she'd marry him, but we all know that's to keep Floyd from getting her dad swung up. They all think Tom Rains shot you."

"Shot me?" Duncan asked weakly. "Oh, yeah, shot me," and Duncan's left hand felt uncertainly for the bullet hole in his side.

Ned saw that Duncan wasn't yet out of the fog and might never be. He was mortally wounded. But Ned couldn't wait two seconds more, if he hoped for the least chance for a getaway. Already cowboys were hurrying around both sides of the house and others were on the front steps.

But Ned stayed. It was a long gamble. They might hang him if he lost. He lifted his hands above his shoulders and shouted, "Come on in, boys. Duncan won't see Floyd get Wilma. Duncan wants to tell who shot him."

Ned watched Duncan's face with stabbing anxiety. All at once understanding began to break into Duncan's glazed eyes. Cowboys crowded in with Floyd in the lead. Ned stepped into a corner to face them. Seeing his brother out of the stupor, Floyd turned white.

"Duncan is out of his head. Crazy! He's a dying man. Get him back to bed!" Floyd shouted.

Duncan vowed, "I'll never have a clearer mind—than right now. I know I'm dying, Floyd, but I want to go out telling the truth. Floyd shot me! I saw him—clear as day. He eased up—over the rock. Let me have it."

Duncan barely got out the last words. He'd saved his last bit of strength for this testimony. He toppled to the floor. A man caught him, eased him down.

"Dead," the man said, shaking his head.

"Duncan was out of his head," Floyd protested. "He didn't know what he was saying."

Ned leaped at his chance. He had put two and two together, and was doing some tall guessing, too.

"Floyd Talbot," he said, "you were on your knees behind that rock when you shot Duncan. The imprint of your patched corduroy breeches will show there in the damp earth. Your boot tracks will show, where you ran from the rock. And stingy Floyd Talbot wears his boots till there are holes in the soles. Go look, boys."

"It won't hurt none to look," somebody said.

Ned's inspiration burst out anew. He exclaimed, "Boys, trail Floyd from the rock out to a spot I'll show you. He'd be smart enough to swab out his Colt after that one shot. Somewhere on his trail you'll find the rag he threw away after he cleaned the gun."

A deathly hush fell over that room. The only thing that moved were the muscles in Floyd's big square face. Slowly those muscles tightened, grew taut. He was trapped. He had one hope yet, that he might make stick his claim that Duncan was delirious. But it was a forlorn hope, with Ned Roebuck thinking so fast and straight. Floyd had what looked like a better hope. He had the drop on Ned. He had his Colt in his hand. Kill Ned, and he might yet talk his way out of this thing.

Suddenly, Floyd cried, "You've owned up to shooting my brother—murdering him—and there's nothing more to be said, Roebuck."

EVEN as he rushed out the last words, Floyd fired at Ned. But Ned had read his intent in that preparatory speech. He saw the twitch of Floyd's mouth as his fingers jerked at the trigger. Ned knew that usually a man firing under such nervous tension and in such haste would jerk the gun muzzle

slightly downward and to the left. Ned therefore dived away from the expected path of the bullet. He grabbed for his gun, desperately, and fired before Floyd could fire again.

His bullet took the heavy, bullish Floyd square in the pit of the stomach. The terrific wallop of the forty-five ball threw Floyd off balance so that he missed his second shot. Ned let him have a second ball. Then a third and fourth, as fast as he could pull a trigger. There wasn't time to take careful aim, but he made his shots count. Floyd toppled over backward with the fourth shot and fell to the floor dead.

Everybody stood still in a breathless hush. The smoke from Ned's Colt mingled with that from Floyd's and drifted slowly up to the ceiling.

"All right, boys," Ned said finally. "I lied about shooting Duncan and for good cause. But you've seen this fight. Do whatever you feel like with me."

Ned dropped his gun and lifted his hands. That brought Wilma racing through the door.

"No, no, Ned!" she cried. "They don't want to do anything to you. You shot to save your own life. You killed a terrible man."

Wilma hesitated just a second before the pale Ned.

"You were going to ask me tonight, weren't you, Ned?" she whispered. "You'd filed on our homestead and bought that sorrel Morgan for me."

Then she stepped close to him, pulled his lifted hands down and put his right arm about her.

"How about it then—honey?" Ned asked, his voice breaking on the words.

"Just take me tighter into your arms, sweetheart!" she whispered back. "Don't ever let me go!"

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Savell said, "You lowdown snake!" and snapped

Puncher With a Past

By JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Three Years to Wait

LYNN RAWLEY stood before the mirror in her room in the Three Sevens ranchhouse fussing with her dark brown hair and wondering why she hadn't more buoyancy of spirit on such a perfect spring morning. The shard of sunlight coming through the window warmed her cheek and there was bird song out there in the budding garden.

She owned the trimmest and most efficient, if not the largest cattle outfit along the Little Missouri. Her father had made wise invest-

Chaldee's head back with a terrific right

Jud Crain, the new puncher on Lynn Rawley's Three Sevens Ranch, had the power to disturb her strangely—but she was committed to rodeo contest man Cort Savell, who happened to be in prison!

ments before he died, and there'd never be financial problems in her life if she proved as prudent.

Lynn had heeded her father's advice.

"The Rawley womenfolk never lost their heads over a lazy cowpuncher's grin, Lynn. There's a lot of 'em out lookin' t' feather their nests, an' the Three Sevens would be a mighty big prize for a no-account fiddle-foot. Kind of wish you'd turned out a homely woman. Anyway, I'm leavin' you an' Ma pretty well fixed an' I don't figure either one of you will ever need to look twice at any man."

Lynn had kept the barrier up for nearly three years after Seth Rawley died. And

then she'd met Cort Savell at the rodeo in Triangle City.

Savell had been a contest man from over Montana way, a rakishly handsome daredevil with a certain way about him. It was Savell who had saved Lynn's life that day the Brahmas broke loose from their pen. The Triangle City arena was a ramshackle affair, with only a single wooden rail strung along in front of the field boxes.

The rangy, tough smoke blowers had gone berserk and one of them charged straight at Lynn, who was talking with a contestant out in the dirt enclosure. She'd tried to get back under the rail but her ankle had turned under her. The cowgirl on the black horse had been unable to get her rope loose in time.

Savell had ridden in out of nowhere, had thrown himself free of the saddle and had "houlihanned" that maddened Brahma while ten thousand spectators had stopped breathing. The steer somersaulted, crashed down and then lay still, its neck broken. Savell had taken no prizes that day. He had spent most of the time on a cot in a little shack under the stands, with a doctor and Lynn Rawley at his side.

Cort Savell, when his ribs had knitted, had gone out and taken a job with the Double Link, a big outfit over by the Musselshell, and Lynn had seen a lot of him after that. He was a man to excite any woman's interest, and make her forget certain resolutions she had made.

AND now Lynn had three more years to wait for Cort Savell.

She was about to turn away from the mirror when she picked up the comb again. The door opened and her mother came in.

"For Pete's sakes, Lynn, why are you taking so long this mornin'? Breakfast has been ready for almost twenty minutes. The bacon'll get cold." Mrs. Rawley shut the door and Lynn slammed the comb down. She wished she knew what was really troubling her. She was as jumpy as a bronc smelling fire.

At the table, she picked uncertainly at her food, and her mother said:

"I still think you asked for trouble when you hired that man Tack brought from town last week!"

That was her difficulty, Lynn thought. The Three Sevens could have gotten along well enough without another rider. She'd felt sorry for Jud Crain, though, and had let Tack Ferguson, the foreman, sell the man to her, even though he'd answered every question evasively.

"When he comes back, I'll get rid of him," Lynn said.

"Imagine it, Lynn! Here only ten days and he asks for three days off. Where did he go? How do we know who he is?"

"He said his mother was sick. Over at Sontag Springs."

"A likely story!" Mrs. Rawley sniffed. "And you believed that?"

"I don't know," Lynn said. "Let's talk about something else, please!"

Mrs. Rawley suddenly crossed the room, reached up and tore the page off a calendar that hung on the wall. Lynn's pretty white teeth clicked against the rim of her cup. Coffee spilled to the tablecloth. Another month gone. To Cort Savell it must have seemed another year.

The cold dull ache was a suffocating lump in her throat as she thought of such a man shut away from the world. She wondered how much of it he could see at the beginning of each terrible day, if the song of birds penetrated the high thick walls.

"When he comes back—"

Mrs. Rawley gripped the handle of a broom more tightly. "When he does, you'll give him what's due him and send him on his way. I wouldn't be surprised if he was part of Buck Ansel's gang."

"Oh, Crain?" Lynn choked out. "That's ridiculous." She pushed back her chair when the talk of the Three Sevens punchers, the clump of hoofs and rattle of gear out in the yard, stepped up. "I'd better be going if I want to go along with them."

"You hardly et a thing, Lynn!"

"Didn't want much," the girl said, "and don't start that business about my not acting like a lady. You can't be a demure maid and run a ranch like this. You can't feel demure when all the time you know if it hadn't been for you, a man would still be riding free."

"It wasn't your fault, Lynn. He was too quick-tempered, too quick to go for his gun," Mrs. Rawley said.

"I'll be back sometime this afternoon," Lynn said, and walked toward the door.

"If that puncher comes back, shall I pay him off?"

Lynn turned. "No. I'll do that myself."

Tack Ferguson and three of his men were already crossing the big meadow that

stretched back from the road running past the Rawley buildings. Whitey Allard and Stumpy Grew waited for Lynn at the gate. Stumpy tipped his hat and gave his boss a pleasant good morning.

"What's so good about it?" Whitey snapped. "This is the time of year I wish the Lord would fergit some time. I sure don't look forward t' the work we got ahead of us today."

"Look at the sun," Stumpy said. "Listen t' them birds, you ungrateful cuss, an' jus' smell that air! Supposin' you was shut up away from it an'—"

"Stop it," Lynn suddenly snapped. "You talk too much!"

Whitey Allard shot Stumpy a warning glance.

"Guess I do, Miss Lynn," the puncher said.

FOR the greater part of that day, the Three Sevens hands labored at a task they had dreaded throughout the winter months. The ice had broken up, leaving edgings of deep bog, and in early spring the quicksand was at its worst.

The ground around every alkali spring was a trembling quagmire, and in the gullies there were deep holes of slimy, tenacious mud that were death traps for water-eager cattle that had been living on snow for weeks. Tack Ferguson came upon the seventh dead animal in one of those traps and swore under his breath.

"No wonder your pa never wanted t' come out on this range this time of year, Ma-'am. When you own an outfit, a sight like this makes you pretty sick."

"You have to take the bad with the good, Tack," Lynn said.

Tack looked at her, slowing the rhythm of his jaws.

"Reckon we do."

"We're wasting time," Lynn said sharply. "We have work to do."

It was an hour before supper time when Lynn rode into the Three Sevens ranchyard with Tack Ferguson. Old Nat Akerley, odd jobs man, was passing the corner of the corral, and Lynn called out:

"Crain get back?"

"Nope," Nat said. "Ain't seen him, Ma-'am."

"Looks like he drifted," Tack growled.

"Never saw a saddle tramp who didn't pick up what was due him," Lynn said, her voice edgy. "If he comes in before ten o'clock tonight, tell him to come up to the house, Tack."

"Right," the foreman said, and glanced at his boss curiously. He'd liked Jud Crain at first sight. He did not see how anyone could help liking the man, even Lynn Rawley.

"I'll pay him off, Tack," Lynn said, as she slipped out of the saddle.

"Maybe he had a good reason to ask off," Tack said.

"I'll be the judge of that, Tack."

"Sorry, Ma'am. But he's a tophand."

Jud Crain got back from Sontag Springs at nine o'clock that night. Tack walked over to the corral.

"I sure am glad t' see you back, Kid," he said. "Better leave the saddle on that bronc until you make sure you still work here."

"That bad?" Jud asked. He was a good looking man of not more than twenty-six years and he sat tall and straight in a saddle. His eyes were mild and there was good humor in the set of his mouth. "Of course, maybe she won't think it's much of an excuse for a man t' stay away this long t' see his ma buried."

"Huh? I'm mighty sorry, Jud."

"Thanks, Tack. I'll git along over an' pick up my time."

LYNN opened the door at his knock. She had changed into a print house dress she had taken from a drawer heavily scented with sachet. This was a sort of anniversary. It was the night Cort Savell had been taken away, a bad night for an absentee to return.

"Step inside, Crain," she said.

He took off his hat, stood against the wall near the door.

Lynn Rawley expected this man to be very sad of eye and looking just a little beaten and told him so, holding sympathy in abeyance.

"I didn't bring my grief back on my sleeve," Jud Crain said. "I figure you still think I put somethin' over on you."

"Put yourself in my place," Lynn said, conscious of a queer disturbance in this man's presence.

"There's a cemetery outside Sontag, Ma-'am. There is a new grave there," Jud Crain said. "My mother was alive when I got there an' I had a chance t' talk to her. Now, if that's all you want of me—"

"I'm sorry, Crain."

"Thanks. Don't guess my mother was sorry t' go, not the way things had been with her.

Tack hinted that I was to get my time."

Mrs. Rawley came out of the next room. "I have it all figured up, Crain." She held some money in her hand.

"He's staying on," Lynn said. "If he wants to."

"Think I'd like to," Jud Crain said, and Mrs. Rawley sniffed her displeasure. "I sure wish your pa was here to send that puncher on his way. I wish I knew what's come over you.

"When it's time to count the calves, don't be surprised you haven't got as many as you figured. Buck Ansel had a lot of wide loopers an' after they was scattered, where did they go? Don't forget they caught three of 'em at the Box E last fall."

Jud Crain grinned. "Heard Buck had nearly sixty men in his gang at one time, for a fact, Mrs. Rawley. Some of 'em, I suspect, went straight when they got the chance."

"They never do, Crain!" Mrs. Rawley snapped.

Jud Crain's jaw muscles bulged. "I'm sorry to hear you say that, Mrs. Rawley," he said, and looked at Lynn, and suddenly she knew what was in his mind.

"I think that's all, Jud Crain!" she said. "Please go."

"Good night," Crain said, turned abruptly and walked out.

"You know what he meant," Lynn said to her mother. "He knows about Cort Savell."

"Most everybody does," Mrs. Rawley said. "You know very well I do not consider Cort bad. Justice can be blind, Lynn."

Lynn nodded, went into her bedroom. Crain knew about Cort Savell, and the reason he had gone to prison. Possibly he had heard the story in its worst form, and believed it.

He had treated her with cold civility from the first day he had worked for Rawley wages and he'd never turned a smile her way. More than once she had heard his infectious laugh come up from the bunkhouse when the wind was right, and she knew it would be something of a pleasure to join in with him.

Cort Savell had paid her significant attention during his stay at the Double Link, and one night in St. Cloud, she'd become aware of the dangerous depth of his jealousy. She had striven for many weeks to get the violent picture out of her mind, but sitting there in the dark, staring out through the window, it was once more vividly clear.

CHAPTER II

Battle in the Street

SHE was walking out of the drugstore again. Lon Chaldee, one of the men who'd tried to gain her favor, stood out on the walk and he tipped his hat and smiled insolently.

"The Queen," he said, and stepped up and took her by the arm. She was twisting away from him when Cort Savell came running from the porch of the St. Cloud hotel. Chaldee whirled, struck for his gun, saw that Savell was not wearing his, then lowered his head and went in at Cort.

Savell said, "You lowdown snake!" and snapped Chaldee's head back with a terrific right hand.

Townspeople poured out of the stores and men formed a circle around the fighters.

Chaldee put up a hard fight but was finally smashed into the dust.

Savell yelled for all to hear, "Don't as much as ever look her way again when I'm around. I'll kill you, Chaldee, if I hear you've spoken to her after this night!"

"Be sure you have your gun, Savell," the beaten man said. "When our paths cross again."

"You can depend on it."

Cort came over and took her by the arm and said, "He'll never bother you again, Lynn. I'll see you to your rig. Shall I drive you home?"

"No," she said. . . .

She could still see the sweat and the blood on him, the fierceness in his dark eyes, and she remembered that age-old emotion that had taken firm hold of her while she watched Cort send Chaldee sprawling in the street, that wild exultation that drives through a woman who knows she is loved when her champion beats off her molester.

The next night he'd come to the Three Sevens and told her that he loved her and she'd let him take her in his arms.

"Give me a little time, Cort," she'd said. "Just a little time."

They'd found Chaldee a week later, face down on the bank of a creek three miles north of St. Cloud. There were two bullets through his chest, closely spaced, and one of them alone would have been sufficient. The sheriff sought out Cort Savell and had found

him at the Double Link. He'd admitted meeting Chaldee at the creek and the man had struck fast for his gun. But when they'd found Chaldee's body, he'd worn no gunbelt, to say nothing of a sixgun.

Savell had sworn to high heaven that his enemy had been armed, and his lawyer had fought for him through the heat of three blistering days. But Chaldee had had many friends and law had come to St. Cloud so they'd found Savell guilty of manslaughter and had given him a sentence of three to ten years.

The night they took him away, Lynn kissed him and told him she'd wait. Her life was his because he had saved it once. And besides she'd been certain that she loved him.

There was no doubt in Lynn's mind that one of Chaldee's friends had removed the dead man's gunbelt, but she was just as sure that her suspicions would never be substantiated in a court of law.

One small fear persisted in her mind. It had crept in there during Savell's trial, when a man from Sontag Springs had testified that Cort had always been mighty eager to use a gun. He'd known Savell in the Dakotas five years ago and he had rolled up his sleeve to show the court an old bullet scar put on his arm by the defendant.

"The witness knows," Cort Savell had said, "he forced the issue. . . ."

A jumble of sounds came up from the bunkhouse and one of them was Jud Crain's inimitable laugh. Lynn set her lips tight and was conscious of that strange, quiet despair once more.

"Lynn, are you sitting there in the dark again?" her mother called.

"Yes," she answered, and laughed a little.

"Try and get some rest," her mother said.

TWO days later, Lynn went out over the range again to see for herself how the spring roundup was progressing. Stumpy Grew and Whitey Allard had been assigned to the irksome task of rounding up stray horses belonging to the Three Seven, and Lynn rode with them. Stumpy was puzzled about the new puncher.

"The mornin' after he come back, he looked changed, Miss Lynn. Somethin' happened that tempered his ma's loss for him. Seems t' me he found somethin' mighty important t' make up for it."

"Nobody can account for a change comin' over a man or an animal," Whitey opined. "What always or most always changes a man around? You're forgettin' the gal in St. Cloud, Stumpy. A feller don't mind losin' an' old rifle when he knows where he can git a brand new one."

Stumpy looked toward Whitey with unconcealed disgust. "No more feelin' than a frozen steer!"

"What was it I said was so bad?" Whitey asked in a hurt voice.

"Philosophy," Stumpy sniffed. "Comin' out of an ugly thing like you it don't sound good."

Lynn said, "A girl in St. Cloud? Crain's got—?"

"Yep. Works in the office of the St. Cloud Gazette," Stumpy replied. "Name's Betty somethin'-or-other."

Lynn's lips pressed tight. "But how could he support anyone? His mother ran a boarding house in Sontag Springs and supported herself."

"Seems like if a lot of couples never started from scratch one time, not many of us would be here right now," Whitey said with impatience. "None of the old settlers started out with a pocketful of money an' a thousan' acres of land. Betty is a nice lookin' girl. Solid an' dependable, Miss Lynn. An' you got t' admit Jud is easy t' look at."

"Let's not talk about him," Lynn snapped.

Three hours later, they rode past a Double Link line camp and Whitey eyed a group of horsemen and caught the glint of a sheriff's star.

"That's Charlie Vale," he said. "Got a posse out for some reason."

"Yep, that's Charlie," Whitey said. "Bigges' stomach in the county. Let's see what's goin' on."

The Three Sevens rode over. Charlie Vale tipped his hat when he saw Lynn. "You seen any strange riders?" he asked.

"No, Sheriff."

"Feller said he saw Buck Ansel an' a couple of spooks out this way last night," Vale said. "Most likely they're holdin' out in the badlands back of the Musselshell. Who is that new man you hired a few days back, Miss Rawley?"

"I don't know much about him," Lynn said uneasily. "He seems all right, Vale."

"Watch any new jaspers comin' in here," the lawman cautioned. "A puncher quit the Box E pretty sudden last night an' took two of Brock Dalgren's horses with him. I don't like the signs, Miss Lynn."

"Come on," Lynn said to her riders. "We have work to do."

A mile farther on, they sighted the branding fire where Tack was getting his rope loose from a bawling calf. Lynn asked for Jud Crain.

"Him? You'll find him over in that box canyon, Ma'am," Tack said. "Darndest thing happened. We come up on a buffalo wallow over there by that tall pine, an' just in time t' pull a wild bronc back through the door of the place where dead broncs go.

"A sorrel, Miss Lynn, not more'n a year old, an' it seems t' have snapped its right foreleg.

"I was for shootin' it, but Jud took over. He showed us how t' rig a sling out of ropes an' horseblankets cut in strips. He's got that bronc all trussed and splinted up, but I could never tell you how he did it. The cuss is a genius."

RIDING into the box canyon, Lynn found Jud Crain holding an old battered tin pail near the frightened sorrel's nose. The girl was amazed at the puncher's handiwork.

"Very clever, I'll admit, Crain," she snapped. "But you're not a wild horse hunter. You work for me to round up cattle."

"Sorry, Ma'am," Jud said, the smile fading from his face. "But I'd do this much for a dog. I can't help the way I'm gaited. No tellin' what kind of blood's in that horse. Might have had that wild stallion, Blaze, for a sire. You could have a real contest bronc here, Miss Lynn. You can take the time I spend with this animal out of my wages."

He turned to the job at hand, and Lynn felt the redness sweep over her face. She allowed her tongue to go a little wild.

"No telling where a horse or a man springs from," she said. "Maybe you've got yourself an outlaw here, Crain!"

"You have a right to your opinion, Miss Rawley," Jud said. "I'll camp out here nights until I'm sure this feller will be all right. Somethin' tells me he'll be worth the loss of my job."

Lynn was suddenly every inch a woman. "Won't Betty like *that*, Crain? You giving most of your time to a horse the next few nights!"

He swung around and stared at her. "The way you said that, Ma'am, well, if you'd been a man you would have been upside down in a mudhole right this minute!"

Stumpy Grew hurried away from there, holding his sweat rag up over his face as if he felt a sneeze coming on. Another Three Sevens hand coughed nervously and picked up his rope and examined it carefully.

Lynn Rawley felt an almost overpowering urge to strike the maddening grin off Crain's face with her quirt. The color left her cheeks and her whole body trembled as if a sudden icy wind had come sweeping down off the buttes.

Jud Crain said, "I'm sorry, Miss Rawley. Soon as I get around to it, I'll stop by the bunkhouse an' get my war bag and bedroll. Looks like you an' me could never get along." He turned away from her and walked to the mouth of the canyon and yelled to Tack. "Be with you in a minute t' help with them calves! Looks like this bronc is goin' t' stay put."

Lynn sat down on a rock and nearly acted as most any other woman would have under the circumstances. She realized that she was not fighting Jud Crain, that she did not want to fight him. It was herself she was coping with, her own uncertainty and doubt, and, for the first time since her father's death, she felt the need of his counsel and some of his strength.

It was a dreary and disheartening business for the rest of the day. They found Three Sevens stock dead in the bogs, in narrow gulches and alkali springs. The smell of burning flesh began to tell on Lynn, and when the sun started sinking low over a line of timber to westward, she called a halt. Tack rode over, muddy, and soaked in his own sweat. He smelled of the branding.

"Don't see why you want t' look at this kind of business," he said.

"I run a ranch, Tack. What's the calf count up to now?"

"About two hundred, Miss Rawley. Understand you're lettin' Jud go."

"I said nothing definite, Tack. Here he comes."

Jud Crain rode up, his horse caked with mud. He looked weary. He said absently, "Me, yankin' cows out of the mud!"

"You any better than me?" Tack grinned.

"Oh," the puncher said. "Was talkin' to myself. I—"

THERE was the sound of a shot out there in the gathering dusk. Tack's tongue stopped sliding along the edge of a cigarette

paper when two more sharp reports followed.

"Hunters," he said. "Mallards in the sloughs this time of year."

Lynn said, "No, they don't shoot them with rifles and six-guns, Tack."

There was a scattering of rifle shots, not more than a mile away.

"You ride on home, Miss Rawley," Tack said. "I figure to take a look. Stumpy, go along with the boss."

"I'll give the orders," Lynn said, and smiled at the foreman. "We'll all take a look."

Jud Crain wheeled his bronc around and rode up toward the buttes. He was standing in his stirrups and looking down on the flats below when the others caught up with him.

"Tack!" Crain called out, and pointed.

Two horsemen were riding hard along a line of scrub oak, firing as they went. One tumbled out of the saddle and rolled over and over as Tack took his Winchester out of its boot.

"Looks like Vale flushed up his game," Jud Crain yelled. "Ansel's a pretty tough mallard!"

The last rider swerved his bronc, trying to reach cover afforded by a swatch of timber. A rifle cracked twice and the bulky figure on the dun horse pitched to the ground and spun on his shoulders and finally slid out of sight in a shallow gully.

The posse broke into full view then. Vale rode ahead, his rifle butt resting on his right knee. The sheriff got out of the saddle and looked down at his quarry. The Three Sevens bunch dropped down off the bench.

"Looks like you had good huntin', Charlie," Tack shouted as he rode up to the posse.

"Got three of 'em," Vale said, and slid down into the gully to look at the bulky badman. "Ansel, sure enough," he said, a note of exultation in his voice. "Hard t' kill, ain't you, Buck?"

Crain got in close to Lynn and said, "You'd better go along home, Ma'am. It isn't pretty when some men die. Stumpy, you an' Whitey—"

"I think you're right, Crain," Lynn said. "And forget what I said awhile ago. I was all wrong."

"Nice t' hear you say that, Miss Lynn. Wish you'd remind one of the boys t' bring some feed out for that horse of mine tomorrow. I'll gladly pay—"

"Stop that kind of talk!" Lynn snapped. "You certainly have a wonderful opinion of me, haven't you?"

"I'd rather not answer that one," Crain said, and moved away. He went over to where Vale was kneeling beside Ansel.

"Ornery lookin' cuss," Tack Ferguson said. "Two bullet holes in him an' his lungs whistle when he breathes."

Crain shook his head at Tack. Nothing had ever looked ugly to him when it was sick or in pain. Ansel had a bullet head and small, widely-spaced eyes, and there was a week's growth of beard on his rugged chin. He looked up at Vale, defiance still showing through the suffering in his eyes.

"No tellin' how long he'll hang on," Vale said. "We can't hang him yet. Anyway, we have trials now in St. Cloud whether a man likes it or not. We'll have the doc patch him up if he can. Somebody help me get him on a horse."

"The others?" Ansel asked, his voice almost inaudible.

"Dead," Vale said. He looked up at the Three Sevens foreman. "They got Jim Foss first, though."

Tack set his lips tight. "Too bad, Charlie. Hard t' make lemonade without cuttin' up a lemon or two. Come on, Jud."

"I'm stayin' out here t'night, you forget?" Crain said.

"Yeah. See you later, Kid."

CHAPTER III

Strange Actions

EARLY the next morning, Lynn said to Whitey Allard, "I want you to take some feed out there for that horse of Crain's. And you take over for him tonight."

"Sure, Miss," Whitey said, startled. He stared at his boss, and scratched his head, then strode away.

Lynn remained on the ranch all that day, but Jud Crain did not return. After supper, she drove into St. Cloud for groceries, and Charlie Vale called her into his office.

"What do you know about this Jud Crain?" Vale asked bluntly.

"No more than you do, Sheriff," Lynn said.

"He's acting mighty strange," Vale said. "Right now he's over in a room in back of the undertaker's place with Buck Ansel. He asked could he see the man alone."

Lynn stared, wordless. A man came into the office and the sheriff said:

"Mack, did Ansel ever have a son?"

"Never heard he did. The story that always went around about Ansel was that his wife an' little girl got lost durin' a flood, an' maybe he's where he is now because of it. He sure had a grudge against the world."

"I'd give a lot to get inside that man's mind," the sheriff said. "He's been over there with Ansel nearly a half hour. Well, that's all, Lynn. I thought maybe you might have got a line on Crain. Thanks."

Lynn got up to go, her knees shaking under her. Outside on the walk, she saw Jud Crain coming across the street, and she waited. She acknowledged his polite nod, then followed him into Vale's office.

Crain said, "There'll be no need of a trial, Sheriff. Buck Ansel is dead. Better go over an' satisfy yourself."

"Look, Kid," the sheriff said. "You're too close-mouthed, and we don't know anythin' about you. What's Ansel to you?"

"When I break the law around here, Vale," Crain said, "You'll have a right t' talk to me like that, not before. What I've been an' what I do, long as it's legal, is no business of yours or anybody else's." He looked at Lynn Rawley, smiled only with his mouth and went out.

Later, in the St. Cloud grocery store she picked up a copy of the St. Cloud Gazette. The headlines said:

BRANDON EXPECTS HARD FIGHT AT POLLS. Supporters of Governor Urge Statewide Campaign tour.

Lige Suder looked over at Lynn as he stuffed packages in a big paper bag. "Think they'll reelect him, Miss Rawley?"

"I hear it will be very close," she said.

"Brandon was a cattleman," a customer offered. "Had a big ranch one time over in Montana, an' he started out as an ordinary cowpuncher. Have t' admire a man like that."

Lynn put the newspaper down. "Fill my order, Lige," she said. "I'll stop back for it." She went out of the store and crossed the street, and stopped to look at the notions in the window of a store next to the office of the Gazette, feeling altogether shameless at this business of prying into the affairs of a Three Sevens cowpuncher.

The door of the newspaper office was ajar and she heard Crain's voice and Betty Korn's musical little laugh, and wondered why it had the power to anger her. Perhaps it was because she couldn't match it until three more years rolled by, or because she suddenly remembered something she'd read in the St. Cloud Gazette months ago.

It had to do with Brandon's utter lack of sympathy for men who broke the law, and the prison system he had inaugurated to discourage others who might have the tendency to take it into their own hands. There were no pardons during his regime.

Lynn felt a terrible loneliness, and her thoughts reached out over the miles that stretched between herself and the prison where Cort Savell, at this moment, stood beside a small barred window.

After supper, the next evening, Charlie Vale came to the ranchhouse.

"You heard what happened last night, Miss Rawley?" he asked.

Lynn shook her head, a vague fear slowing the blood in her veins. Vale handed her a sheet of soiled paper.

"Buck Ansel wrote it, of that I am certain. It's a confession, Lynn. He tells how one of his gang took the gun off Chaldee, this Joad Welch havin' need of one. Looks like a cooked-up job t' me. That Jud Crain talked t' Buck, see? He convinced him he'd have nothin' to lose by writin' this thing, Lynn, most likely told Buck he'd have a better break where he was goin' if he did."

Lynn scanned Ansel's scrawled writing hurriedly, her heart thumping wildly. She looked at Vale, a sudden hope showing in her eyes, and the sheriff shook his head.

"Won't hold with the law, Lynn. How do we know there ever was a Joad Welch? What is in that man's mind? If Crain—?"

"They'll have to pardon him, Vale," Lynn persisted. "A dying man's word is never questioned."

"You're forgettin' the kind of governor we've got, Lynn. A shootin' to Brandon is murder no matter if the victim was carryin' a gun. He holds no brief for any man who kills another one, no matter what the cause."

"Didn't he ever hear of self-defense?" Lynn asked sharply.

Vale shrugged. "I'll wait until I can see him personally, Lynn. You know he's comin' to Sontag Springs in just a week to make a speech. But I'm telling you it is just a waste of time." He put the note in his pocket.

"It looks like Crain, no matter what he is, has got somethin' of a heart, Lynn. He's a nervy cuss!"

WHEN the sheriff had gone, Lynn sat at the kitchen table and wept. Later, she slipped quietly out and walked toward the corral. Suddenly she stopped. Crain was lifting his voice to Tack Ferguson.

"You don't take a man's word, do you, Tack?"

"If you've got nothin' to hide, Jud, why try to hide it?" Tack snapped back.

"That's my own business," Crain countered. "You've been imaginin' things, Tack! An' until last night I never saw Ansel before. What was I doin' with the man? Makin' some breaks, Tack, if that means anything to you."

"It doesn't," Tack said.

"Ansel was a devil without horns," Stumpy Grew cut in. "Even when he was passin' out, he wouldn't give a man a break, Jud. How'd you talk him in t'—"

"Maybe I got a way with me, Stumpy," Jud said. "You sure have no idea who I am!"

There was the sound of a chair sliding back, and Lynn moved away toward the corral, then saw Jud Crain walking toward the same objective. He saw her and was about to change his course when she called his name.

He waited until she came up. "Evenin', Miss Rawley," he mumbled.

"Crain, you did that for me?"

"That letter of Ansel's you mean?"

"You know that's it," Lynn said. "Why did you go to such trouble and let men think what they were bound to think?"

"You want that Cort Savell to rot away in that cell for another three years, Miss Rawley?" he asked her quietly. "I don't know the man, but I've seen an' talked to you. Even if he was my worst enemy, I think I'd try to get him loose, with a woman like you pinin' her heart out for him. Isn't that a good reason for me to go an' see Buck Ansel?"

"Thank you, Jud," Lynn said, using his first name for the first time. "Thank you very much. I never thought your opinion of me was very high."

"They're talking about this Savell," Jud said. "What a tough break he got! I wonder does the man realize how lucky he is, Miss Lynn? Reckon a lot of men'd wait three years, even locked up in a jail, knowin' what they had waitin' for 'em when they got out. He must be a mighty good specimen of a man."

"Yes," Lynn said, her throat feeling as if Crain's hands were over it and pressing tight. "You have a girl, Jud. I saw her in St. Cloud, and she's very pretty."

"Kinda sweet, ain't she, Ma'am?" Jud Crain asked her. "No bigger'n a mouse."

"Jud, if you're not all you claim to be, leave her alone," Lynn said in not much more than a whisper. "Don't take her away from security and to a life where she won't know a moment's peace. A woman should know everything about a man's past if she sees fit to marry him."

"Betty never asked no questions. I haven't asked her to marry me. I haven't even told her I loved her."

"Do you?"

"I work for you, Miss Rawley," Crain said. "I'll take orders from you an' try to earn my pay. But I don't figure you have the right t' pry into my personal life."

"I haven't, and I'm sorry," Lynn said. "I want to tell you once more how grateful I am for what you're trying to do. Vale said there's no chance of the governor acting upon such evidence."

"Vale said," Crain scoffed. "Vale doesn't know everything. Maybe I'll call on this Brandon myself.

"Guess I'll ride out an' see how that bronc's comin' along," he added abruptly. "Whitey'll be mighty lonesome out there alone. I'll join up with Tack in the mornin'."

"All right, Crain," Lynn said. She stood near the corral and admired the way he roped his horse. She watched him as he rode away, then she walked slowly back to the house.

Mrs. Rawley sat in her big rocking chair in the living room, crocheting, and she glanced at her daughter.

"The nerve of that man!" she said. "Cheating the law. Conniving with a black-hearted devil like Buck Ansel."

"He did it for me," Lynn said hotly, her eyes flashing.

Her mother nodded. "Why should he want to take the trouble, Lynn? There's nothing for him to gain here. You look out. He's playing his own cards because he never saw Savell in his life. He's a sly one, that Crain."

"Don't be ridiculous," Lynn said. "He's in love with a girl in St. Cloud."

"Don't doubt it. Maybe he's foolin' a dozen others," Mrs. Rawley said.

"I don't believe it!" Lynn said, and went out into the kitchen and slammed the door. Her mother's mouth snapped open. Her chair stopped rocking.

CHAPTER IV
Put to the Test

LYNN got a postcard from Charlie Vale the next afternoon. The sheriff thought it would be a good idea if she went along to Sontag Springs with him to see Governor Brandon. The man might be influenced after seeing the kind of girl Cort Savell had picked for himself. Vale said that every angle should be considered.

"I think Charlie Vale is right," Mrs. Rawley said.

Sontag Springs was the county seat. The railroad ran straight through the town, not more than a block from the Elko Hotel, where the stage from St. Cloud stopped. The sheriff got out and gave Lynn Rawley his hand, and looked up at the big oilcloth campaign sign that was stretched taut over the entrance to the Elko. It featured a picture of the governor.

"A handsome man, Miss Lynn," Vale opined. "Looks familiar in a way."

Lynn said, "Maybe he doesn't look like that at all, Sheriff." She read the big words on the sign:

FOR GOOD GOVERNMENT, VOTE FOR BRANDON. A Square Deal For All! Preserve Law And Order In Your State!

The town was filled, and horses and wagons lined the streets. In the square, carpenters were busily throwing up a temporary wooden platform, and the stores were decked with bunting. It was close to election day and so there were plenty of drunks.

Lynn took Vale's arm and they entered the crowded lobby. The confusion frightened her. She hung back a little, and Vale said:

"Nothin' to be nervous about. I guess I got a right t' see Brandon. I swing a few votes in my neck of the woods."

There was a makeshift cardboard sign at the foot of the stairs. It said:

BRANDON'S HDQS. 2d FLOOR.

An hour passed before they were admitted into Brandon's presence. The first citizen of Missouri wore an expensive suit of black broadcloth, the trousers of which were tucked into beautifully tooled cattleman's boots. His face was rugged and tanned, smoothly shaven. Lynn fought for control when he smiled briefly. She caught herself staring boldly at the governor, and flushed to the roots of her hair.

"I'm sorry, Your Honor," she choked out. "You are so like someone I know."

Vale cleared his throat and took an envelope from his pocket. Brandon said, "Sit down, won't you? I have very little time, Sheriff, so please state your business quickly."

Vale handed Brandon the envelope. The governor removed the soiled sheet of paper and opened it and scanned the ragged writing. He looked at the lawman, plainly impatient.

"Buck Ansel?" he said scornfully. "You think any word of his, spoken or written, would ever hold in a court of law? You want this—" Brandon looked at the confession again. "You want me to recommend a pardon for this Cort Savell?"

Lynn said, "Yes, Governor. He is the man I'm—going—to marry. I know he is innocent of what we regard in this state as a crime. Does a dying man lie?"

"Men like Ansel are not above doing anything, my dear girl," Brandon said. He thrust the paper into the envelope and tossed it to the table. "I will look up the case for my own satisfaction, but I am sure I will not see fit to grant his request."

Vale's face became stormy. "There are extenuating circumstances here, Brandon! If you want those votes in my part of the county—"

"I'll count on the votes cast by people who want the law enforced up to the hilt in this state, Sheriff!" the governor snapped. "And be careful with your threats lest you lose your star!" He turned and bowed to Lynn. "I'm sorry, Miss, but I'm afraid I can't help you."

Lynn said abstractedly, "Thank you for seeing us, Sir," and got unsteadily to her feet. She had fairly to tear her eyes away from Brandon's. "I think we've taken up enough of his time, Sheriff."

Vale snatched the envelope from the table and crammed it in his coat pocket. He glared at the governor, took Lynn by the arm, and went out of there. Walking down the stairs to the lobby, he said:

"Well, this will teach Jud Crain not to try an' make the breaks he talks about. This'll take that puncher down a little."

"Did you notice anything peculiar about Brandon?" Lynn asked in a voice that was a half whisper. "Something that—"

"Noticed he was a self-satisfied, smug,

arrogant cuss!" Vale snapped. "I'll strip him of a lot of votes, you'll see, Miss Rawley!"

Lynn smiled up at Vale. "I know what you need right now, Sheriff. You go and get one and I'll sit here in the lobby and wait."

Vale checked his temper, grinned at Lynn. "I am mighty thirsty and a little riled. I won't be long, Ma'am."

THE girl was sitting in the lobby of the Elko trying to set something straight in her mind when a flashily dressed man began to bother her. He apparently was a drummer, and his breath smelled of more than casual imbibing. He knew where there was a place a woman could have something stronger to drink than root beer.

"Please go away," Lynn said coldly.

"Now, now, my girl—"

"You heard the lady!" a voice said, and then the drummer was spun around and thrown half way to the entrance of the Elko, his derby rolling across the faded carpet. Lynn looked up and saw Jud Crain and she breathed a sigh of relief and smiled gratefully.

"Where's Vale, Miss Rawley?" He whipped off his hat and sat down, and Lynn made room for him.

"Having some refreshment," she said. "After what happened, I'm sure he needed it. We got nowhere with the governor, Crain. I certainly appreciate your efforts and I'm sorry they were wasted."

Jud Crain looked at the picture of Brandon that had been placed on the wall near the hotel desk.

"Guess he feels himself t' be a mighty big man, huh? High an' mighty, an' downright righteous. Vale got that thing Ansel wrote?"

Lynn nodded. "Why did you come here, Jud?"

"Elections have more effect on me than a circus," Crain grinned. "Guess I haven't been much good t' the Three Sevens, but things have been kinda mixed up with me lately." He studied the campaign poster again. "Don't much care about certain hombres bein' thrown into prison. They ain't personalities to the great an' strong governor. Just bad apples in a barrel that can stay where they are and rot. Reckon I got to talk t' the big man!"

"Keep out of trouble, Crain!" Lynn said, her voice tremulous.

"I reckon I will," Jud said, and then saw Charlie Vale coming into the lobby. He got up, and the sheriff was shocked to see him in Sontag Springs.

"You're wastin' your time, Kid," Vale ground out. "You've wasted our time!"

"Seein' as I got that confession from Buck Ansel," Crain said, "I'll take it back, Sheriff."

Vale whisked it out of his pocket and threw it at Crain. "Come on, Miss Rawley. We can get the four o'clock stage out!"

"Thanks for takin' all the trouble, Sheriff," Jud said. He bowed stiffly to Lynn, turned and shouldered his way through the crowded lobby.

Lynn said, "Vale, I'd like to talk to the sheriff here in Sontag Springs. He should know if a woman named Crain ever kept a boarding house here. I would also like to visit the cemetery."

"Yeah," Vale said. "I'm that curious myself."

Later, Charlie Vale and Lynn Rawley rode out of Sontag Springs. The lawman remained unusually quiet until the stage was two miles nearer St. Cloud.

"Beats me, Lynn. His mother lived in that county seat for almost ten years and nobody ever knew she'd had a son nor where she come from, an' besides all that, whatever became of her husband."

"All lives are not regulated, Vale," Lynn said. "A lot of them are badly smashed almost at the beginning. I wish I knew what was bothering me, Sheriff. I'm trying to think of something I can't."

CHAPTER V

Stunning News

JUD CRAIN rode into the Three Sevens close to midnight, and Lynn sat at her window and watched him strip the gear off his horse and turn it loose into the corral. When Vale helped her off the stage in St. Cloud, he'd said:

"Somethin' tells me that Jud Crain won't come back, Miss Rawley," and the sheriff's words had disturbed her. "When a girl gives away three years of her life an' shuts herself off from everybody else, well, some men think more of time than that."

"You'll oblige me by keeping that kind of observation to yourself, Vale," Lynn had snapped, unwilling to admit his words had

affected her greatly.

She watched Crain cross over to the bunkhouse and then she went back to her bed and soon fell asleep, some words her father had once said to her stirring in the back of her mind.

"When a man does you a favor and gets nothing for himself out of it, you know you got a friend you can trust."

At the end of the next day, Jud Crain knocked on the ranchhouse door, and Lynn said when she admitted him:

"How is the horse?"

"Goin' to be good as new," Crain said. "He's yours, Miss Rawley. After all, I been takin' care of the critter on your time. But that isn't what I come here for. I'll be movin' on in about ten days or two weeks. All dependin' what day Cort Savell gets home."

Lynn dropped a book she had been holding. "What did you say, Crain?"

He repeated his statement and Lynn said, "Are you loco? You mean to say you—?" She laughed nervously. "I never saw a man so sure of himself. He thinks he can get the governor to do what he refused to do for the sheriff of St. Cloud." She laughed again.

"Don't figure I'd want to work for Savell," Jud said. "Remember I give you notice, Miss Rawley." He swung on his heel and went out, and Lynn dropped into a chair and tried to stop laughing.

Tack Ferguson and Jud Crain were carrying rolls of barbed wire out of the hardware store in St. Cloud a few days later. They were loading the last roll into the dead-axe wagon when Sheriff Vale walked up. He stood and watched Jud sleeve the sweat off his face, an incredulous expression in his eyes.

"What's happened, Sheriff?" Tack asked.

"Governor Brandon is pardoning Cort Savell, that's all," Vale said.

Tack's cigarette fell from his lips. He stared at Vale, then swung his eyes toward Jud Crain. He tried to speak, but his mouth was dry.

"You told Lynn Rawley yet?" he finally asked the sheriff.

"Saw her in the drygoods store a few minutes ago," Vale said. "I told her first thing."

"How in Tophet was it done?" Tack choked out. "Brandon—"

"All depends on who talks t' him," Crain said.

A woman brought Lynn a glass of water and said, "Drink this, Miss Rawley, and you'll be all right."

"I'm quite all right now," Lynn said and got up from the couch in the little back room. "It was just some news I got, and it gave me a shock. Thanks very much."

But she went out into the street in a kind of stupor. Cort was coming home. Cort Savell was free! Suddenly she caught at the wheel of a wagon standing close to the walk to keep herself from falling. Tack Ferguson came running.

THE stars were out. They blinked down at the ranch buildings of the Three Sevens as Lynn Rawley crossed the yard to the bunkhouse. Whitey Allard was sitting outside on a bench, his old pipe stewing. It was a warm night for that time of year.

"Is Crain inside?" Lynn asked.

"I'll get him," Whitey said. He got up and went inside and a medley of voices quickly died. "Jud, the boss wants you," Whitey said.

Crain came out. Lynn said, "I want to talk to you."

"All right." He walked with her until they were beyond earshot.

She tried to keep her voice steady and appear to be simply curious. "I want to know, Crain, how you got Savell pardoned. I'll never rest until I do know."

"What difference does it make?"

"I've got to know, Jud."

Her voice was no longer steady and Crain looked at her closely. She would not meet his glance and kept looking down at the ground.

"Please, I must know."

"You'll never tell another living soul?" He put his hands on her shoulders and she had to clench her fists to keep control.

"I promise," she whispered.

"It just happens that the governor of the state isn't the righteous man he professes t' be," Crain said. "He was married once before, but his ambitions were bigger than his heart, and he took up with a woman whose father was in the state legislature and owned a big cattle ranch. He humiliated my—his wife—until she let him go his way.

"I told Brandon all that and gave him proof. A marriage and birth certificate, but it was the last named that set him back on his heels. He never knew—anyway, I told him I'd spread the story all over the state if he didn't let Savell free, and he knew if he

didn't, he'd never have a chance for re-election.

"That's all there is, all that will interest you. Savell will be back in a few days or weeks. Funny, Lynn, I thought you'd be much happier about it than you seem to be."

"It was the shock, Jud," the girl said. She stared at him, shaking her head from side to side. "You care nothing for position, do you? What people have. You could take your place alongside the governor!"

"I made it clear to someone he'd never have a son," Jud said grimly. "He knows that now. There's more than material things. There is honor and pride, Miss Rawley."

"Crain," Lynn said breathlessly. "I never knew such men lived."

"Please go," he said. "I might tell you just why I couldn't stay on and work for Cort Savell."

Lynn said, "I'll always be grateful, Jud," and turned quickly and ran toward the house, knowing she had lied to him. She was not grateful in the true sense of the word, not at all. She would have been just as happy if she'd found out a rabbit had broken loose from a trap or a little bear from its cage. She knew how Cort would feel when he walked out from within the big walls at Crescent City, but she knew now, had known for many days that she did not want him to come back to her.

But he would come back and she would keep her promise for her life belonged to him. Her heart could never be Savell's. Wherever Jud Crain went it would go along with him. When she stumbled into the house, the tears were in her eyes, and her mother came over quickly and put her arms around her.

"I think I know, Lynn," Mrs. Rawley said. "I've seen it comin' day by day. I wish he'd never set foot on this ranch."

"Don't say a word—against him," Lynn sobbed. "Not one word. I guess it happened the minute I saw him. You needn't worry about—Savell. I'll—I'll marry him."

"I didn't say you should," her mother said. "I said nothin' of the kind. We'll work it out some way. You an' me, Lynn."

CORT SAVELL reached St. Cloud at midafternoon ten days later. His skin wore the prison pallor, and there was bitterness written around his mouth and stamped in his eyes. He wore no gun. He looked at his watch and he saw that he had almost a half hour before the rig would come in from the Three Sevens to pick him up. He walked over to Charlie Vale's office and found him in, and said:

"This Jud Crain, Sheriff. Why did he take the trouble t' do this for me? There had t' be a reason."

"He got a job with Lynn Rawley an' he was grateful, that's all I know," Vale said.

"Uh-huh?" Savell said, skepticism in his voice. "Where'll I find a Joad Welch?"

"You're in the clear, Savell," Vale snapped. "You want to get yourself thrown back in a cell on account of some sneaky rat like Welch?"

"One of Ansel's men, huh?" Savell grinned. "I happen to know some that rode with him. Buck got killed, didn't he?" He got up and looked down at Vale. "They let you get letters in that jail, Sheriff. I got some from a friend and he told me somethin' about this Jud Crain. He said he figured Lynn was in love with the puncher!"

Vale said, "Look, Savell, how do you know it's true?" There was fear in the sheriff's eyes. "He got you out of that cell, Cort, and—"

"Stop gabbin', Sheriff," Cort Savell said, and glanced quickly at the clock. "I got time t' light out of here if you'll give me a gun an' a bronc. Ever rot inside four walls, hungering for the smell of the wind, and horseflesh under you?

"For weeks an' weeks? No? Then you can't understand why I couldn't settle down for at least ten years, Vale. I'm goin' to ride an' ride, Sheriff. Tell her that! Tell her she don't owe me a thing."

Vale got up and held out his hand. "You're a pretty good cuss," he said. "You'll get the bronc an' a six-gun, inside ten minutes!"

"Hurry it up, Vale. You'll never know what'll make a man change his mind."

Cort Savell rode out of St. Cloud not more than five minutes before the Three Sevens buckboard pulled up in front of Vale's office. Lynn got out and walked into the lawman's office, her lips tightly set. Jud Crain and Stumpy Grew waited outside.

Vale said, "You look mighty pretty, Lynn."

"Thanks," she said listlessly, glancing around the room. "Where's Cort?"

"Left a few minutes ago, Lynn," the sheriff said. "Wish I didn't have to tell you this. Said to have lots of luck an' that everything was squared up. He wa'n't the marryin' kind, Lynn, an' he said settlin' down in one place

after where he'd been was—"

Charlie Vale nearly fell over backwards in his old armchair when Lynn rushed him and put her arms around his neck.

"Thanks," she breathed in his ear, and ran out. He heard her call out: "Have a good time in town, boys! I'll drive back—alone!"

A MILE outside of town, Lynn thought there never had been such a perfect day. She knew how Cort Savell felt, riding free. She knew Jud Crain was not back there laughing with the girl in the Gazette office because he was making a dust cloud not far behind her. He'd catch up soon.

At a bend in the road, Jud drew abreast of her and she looked into a pair of eyes that were almost identical with a pair she'd seen on a campaign poster.

"Jud, I'm so glad about a certain thing. I'm glad you took after your mother. It is all pretty plain to me."

"That's what I've been thinkin'," Jud said. "I always said that only one person would ever know too much, the person that would be closest to me. The girl I'll marry."

Lynn's lightness of heart resolved into a dull ache in her throat. "You haven't met her yet, Jud?" She stared straight at the road ahead, hoped he would not answer.

"I have," Jud said. "An' I got t' marry her because she knows too much."

"The girl at the Gazette?"

"Her?" Jud Crain laughed. "She's waitin' for a feller to come back from college. I've been thinkin' things over. The girl I want more'n anything in the world has too much money an' I said to myself on the way into town, maybe it would kind of even up if she knew who I was—an' she knows all right. And to be sure nobody else'll ever know, I got to be where she is all the time."

"I think you've proved to her that you're not after her worldly goods, Jud," Lynn said, fighting hard to keep her voice casual and matter of fact. "You must love her very much, Jud, to have gone to the trouble of setting the man she was supposed to marry free. She knows that, Jud."

"But does she love me?"

Lynn stopped the horses. "Yes, Jud, from the first time you stepped into the ranchyard."

Jud Crain slipped out of the saddle, reached into the buckboard and lifted Lynn out but did not set her down. Her boots kicked up a little as he kissed her. His hat fell off and he felt her fingers in his hair. He laughed with her and said he guessed it was the craziest proposal any girl ever got.

"Any kind of an offer of marriage from the right man suits me," Lynn laughed, and drew him down on the mossy bank beside her. "If Cort had seen fit to put up a fight, would you have accommodated him, Jud?"

"Reckon. If I had any idea at all you would have wanted me to," Jud said.

"Why are some men so blind?" Lynn asked, her face against his shoulder.

"Huh? I've seen men look too long at a girl an' git their eyes poked out," Jud said. "Say, I wonder if Tack is lookin' after that prize bronc of mine. Better go an' look him over t'night. Want t' go along, Lynn?"

"I'd love to, Jud," Lynn said, and sighed happily. Sure, she thought, you never knew just what kind of a past was behind a stray horse or a stray man, who their sire really was. Lynn slid her arm around the puncher's neck, marvelling at the scheme of things. Nobody would ever know it, but it was going to feel mighty good to know you were the wife of a governor's son. She had Jud all to herself. She felt sorry for Governor Brandon.

BULLETS FOR THE DEPUTY

(Concluded from page 65)

were both standing now, looking at the sheriff. "I downed four of those men and the mountain lion killed Caxton. Later I got the lion."

"Just what I was afraid of," said the sheriff. "Knew if I got me a deputy, he would have all the fun."

"I've had enough of that sort of fun to last me a lifetime," said Blake. "You see I was a U. S. deputy marshal for five years before I resigned a week ago. Aimed to buy me a ranch, marry a nice girl and settle down." He looked at Joan. "I've found the girl—if she's willing."

"She is," said Joan, moving closer.

"Aw, shucks," muttered the sheriff. "Looks like I'm goin' to lose a deputy and a daughter, too!"

"Go away, Sheriff," said Blake. "Here's a man who wants to kiss a girl."

Sheriff Danton moved away without even looking back. He was used to being bossed.

"You, sister!" said the horrified parson

Baptized Buckaroos

By JOE ARCHIBALD

It takes highway robbery and a sudden flood to accomplish the conversion of Hattie Pringle, the Montana Whirlwind!

HATTIE PRINGLE, singing louder if not as pretty as a meadow lark full of big fat worms, drove her Model T out of the town of New Eden an hour after dusk. In her reticule were four thousand dollars in cash realized by the sale of one hundred head of T-Bone bovines to the representative of an eating house chain from the effete East. Wheeling around the base of Shinbone Peak she saw an old log in the road and quickly slammed on the brakes. After straightening out her nose that had made contact with the windshield, Hattie got out of the skitterbuggy. She was lifting one

end of the log off the highway when somebody snapped, "Put up your hands, Fatty!"

The town of Milldew's guardian angel was slow in complying and suddenly felt something press against her torso in the region of her sacroiliac, and she knew it was not a banana. "Drop the warbag, sister, or I'll ruin that bunch of scenery you calls a hat! This ain't a joke."

Hattie dropped her bag, lifted her hands skyward and turned slowly to look at the citizen wearing the faded blue bandanna over his face. "You don't know what it is you do, you polecat," she forced out. "This is the Lord's money. It is t' build a place of worship like the one we had burnt down three weeks ago."

"Yeah? Religion'll keep even if it ain't kept under a roof, ha!" the holdup man grinned, and shot the air out of both Hattie's front tires. He picked up her bag, he backed off the road, turned and ducked into a clump of pine, laughing as he went. The rock Hattie threw missed the target, bounced back off a tree trunk and smashed her windshield. "Oh, gobs," she sighed, and sat down on the running board. "Four thousan' pieces of lettuce to be squandered on wine, women an' song when the Reverend Snadgropper needs a church. One hun'red head of stock nursed along an' fattened fer over two years an' now all gone as quick as a flip of me lunchhook. They won't never believe I was held up. They'll say I hid the dinero an' renigged, Pete."

Pete Pringle could not comment one way or the other for Hattie's spouse had long since sashayed into the land of good-by forever, helped along by an owlhoot's slug inserted in his anatomy.

"Well, I better change them tires," Hattie sighed and reached into the back of the Model T for the tools. "Progress'd be a wonderful thing if it didn't need air in its wheels. The things that happen t' me. Bushwash! Abe Lincoln had a wingding of a time durin' the Civil War compared t'—"

A HALF-HOUR later Hattie was convinced that it was all work and no play where a jack was concerned. She finally tossed the gadget into the back seat, voiced some words she'd learned from Pete, and lifted her aching chassis into the driver's seat. "I'd swap this ding-donged contription right now fer a burrer. Better make it two burrers," she groaned, and found she had skinned all her knuckles.

Getting out of the skitterbuggy in front of the Milldew House at dusk, Hattie was in no mood to be crossed. Her old hat over one eye, mud from shirtwaist to arch preservers, she glared at a hopeful welcoming committee. Simeon Snadgropper rubbed the palms of his hands expectantly.

"Like they say in one of them bat an' ball games," Hattie sniffed. "I was robbed. Four miles out of New Eden a masked bandit stuck me up for the whole batch of lucre. Shot out my tires an' the first galoot says I'm a liar, I'll hit him on top of the head s' hard he'll be peerin' out through the second button hole in his shirt fer the rest of his life."

"I warned you, sister," the sin buster yelped. "I tol' you nothin' good would come of transactin' business on the Sabbath. I told everybody why the old church burnt down, too. He who sins will git his just reward like my predassessor, Testament Threadway, who tasted of the vile elderberry. I—"

"It was the bes' batch I ever made!" Hattie protested. "What a bookay! What a—er—I got t' talk t' the law!"

"Look fer a hole t' crawl in, Satan," the preacher intoned, flailing the air with his fist. "There ain't room enough fer both of us here an'—"

"You won't hit him that way," Hattie yipped. "Better start kickin' at the ground, Reverend."

"No church," Judge Tolliver groaned. "Don't seem right t' hold meetin's in the Exalted an' Ennobled Sons of The White Brahma's hall. Hattie, if I thought for a minute you—"

"Look, you dried up ol' boot," Hattie roared. "You couldn't think for a second, but if you dare say just one li'l word that rubs the wrong way I'll do things to you a Apache would be ashamed of. We'll just have t' git perscriptions t' build."

"We'd be s' old it'd be too late fer prayin'," Judge Tolliver said. Hattie was in front of the drugstore when she met Nettie Turple. Nettie was a hopeful spinster with pointed elbows that were always in the way, and she had a little egg-shaped face windowed by a pair of big blue eyes and fed through a little mouth that drooped at each corner. "I heard what happened, Hattie. Now it won't never be built in time fer me t' git married."

"Say that ag'in, Dearie," Hattie gulped. "Married? T' who? You swore by your bearded anchesters you'd never hook up with

a suspected banker—"

"It is not Hungerford Fife," Nettie said. "It is Waldo Sumpwell. Look!" She held out her left hand and splayed fingers as long as tent stakes. A diamond as big as a chickpea made Hattie blink.

"Sufferin' catfish!" Hattie said. "Where would that hombre grab off a dazzlin' dornick like that? It—"

"A hairloom, Hattie," Nettie said. "Was his grandma's solitary."

Recovering from the mental right hook, Hattie grinned. "Then you'll want that piece of ground t' start sodbustin' on, huh? The price still stan's, Nettie. Three thousan' dollars."

"Nope. Waldo is not a man of the soil," the damsel divulged. "And he has plenty of means of his own, an' he is not the kind a bride has t' finance, like Hungerford."

Hattie sighed. The butterflies were on the wing in her stomach once more and she brushed loose strands of hair away from her eyes and limped on her way. She climbed the stairs to her office, looked at Pete's picture and shook her head. "They got me in the ol' satchel, you stewpot. Say, are you laughin'?" She loosened her stays, took off her shoes, and plunked heavily into her big armchair. "What a day. Gobs of fire, it should of been the thirty-first of Feb'uary whicht couldn't happen."

Four months ago Nettie Turple and Hungerford Fife had been sighing over each other when apart. Hungerford had wooed well and had won. The citizen who yearned to till the soil had worked in the Milldew Bank as a janitor up to the night about four months ago when the dinero storehouse had been touched for nearly eight thousand dollars by raiding owlhoots. Entrance had been effected by a stout back door, the lock of which had not been disturbed, and it had been Hungerford's chore each and every night after he had cleaned up the bank to see that it was bolted and barred.

AN investigation had followed, conducted by Judge Tolliver, Milldew's chief of police and the county sheriff. An old settler testified that Hungerford Fife's uncle, one Jabe Nebo, had been caught robbing a bank fifteen years ago, and had flown the state pen after serving three years. "Yep, he never got took back there," the old-timer had said. "Bet he come t' Milldew under cover of night an' plotted with the defendant. Hungerford Fife is an excessory. Was goin' t' git married, wa'nt he? Gent needs dinero t' start up a farm an' begin supportin' a wife. Bet he buried the loot an'—"

Nettie had told the apology for a grand jury that she had intended to finance Hungerford, but Judge Tolliver sniffed and said, "No gal would be that loco. Anyways you got no right t' testify fer or against an intended husband."

Hungerford, when asked to state his whereabouts on the night of the crime between the hours of ten and midnight, had refused to answer. Judge Tolliver had tried to get a true bill against the bank janitor, but the county sheriff had assured the judge that unless they could prove things against Hungerford Fife to be true nothing would stick, not even a writ of habeus corpus. And so, the evidence being all circumstantial, Hungerford Fife had been released, fired from the Milldew Bank, and wrapped up in a soogan of suspicion. A week later Nettie Turple had cast him aside as if he'd simply been an old feather boa.

Hattie sighed from way down deep and looked at Pete's picture. "Funny, huh? A boy or girl baby uses up its firs' couple years learnin' t' talk, an' then it takes both of 'em the rest of their lives t' learn t' shut up. Bought them thirty acres of land from Midas Moody jus' two years ago, an' right after they dammed up that tributory of Goose Creek an' took all the water away. Moody knowed it was goin' to happen. He hooked me, Pete. He come an' give me the ol' horse laugh, an' I says you think you're smart, huh? If I don't sell that patch of real estate at a profit before three years is up, the T-Bone north pasture is all your'n!"

There was a sound from the doorway that pulled Hattie's head around. It reminded her of the last pint of dishwater going down a sink drain. It was the Reverend Snadgropper clearing his throat. "I could of swore you was talkin' to somebody, Sister Pringle. Glad t' find you alone." He lifted up his coattails and eased his bony frame to a rickety cane-bottomed chair. "The church buildin' can wait, sister. But baptism cannot, yeah verily."

"Huh?"

"No soul can ever go to eternal rest without first having been cleansed in the waters of the Almighty," the sky pilot intoned. "How many people of this community have been baptized, Sister Pringle?"

"Well, I fell outa a boat in Goose Creek," Hattie said. "Judge Tolliver has been soaked fer years—say, you think there could be a connection between me gittin' robbed an' what happened t' the bank? The same owl-hoot, Reverence?"

"Sister Pringle, do not evade the subjeck. I shall name a day not far hence when all sinners will go to the river an' be saved," the parson said.

"It is an awful hike t' the River Jordan, dearie," Hattie gulped.

"Any stream is the Jordan, sister, when officiated over by a repersentative of the Lord. Amen. I'll let you know as soon as I decide upon the day." The Reverend Snadgropper arose and looked at the picture hanging on the wall. "I have been told of him, sister. Ah, the cross you must of bore. You shall be the first to be baptized!"

"If you wa'n't a servant of the Lord," Hattie said, "I'd christian you with a bunch of knuckles. Pete was the salt of the earth. It ain't never tasted no good t' me sincet he walked away with the shaker, ha, ha! Be seein' you, dearie."

WHEN THE spiritual advisor of Milldew had taken his leave, Hattie's thoughts turned to one Waldo Sumpwell. Waldo was a prissy character with eyes as guileless as a calf's and the ten gallon hat and the nifty Justin high-heeled boots he always wore were as out of place on his person as an ostrich in the Yukon. Waldo was an itinerant agent for a concern in Kansas City that manufactured lemon and vanilla extract, and he made it quite plain that he did not have to work for a living and only peddled the cookery perfume to keep from being bored to death.

Waldo was supposed to be a remittance man, his family having cast him out when he refused to wed with the daughter of a pillaress of society down in Little Rock. "Soon as that old fogey of a gran'pa dies, they got to send me the hun'red thousan' dollars or so in a bunch," Waldo told the judge one day. "When I marry it will be for true love."

Hattie Pringle, having exercised her poor old noodle into a tizzy without getting anywhere, made herself presentable and vacated her business office. She climbed into her Model T and drove out of Milldew and toward the T-Bone ranch, barely aware of where she was and what she was doing. She took a curve without slowing up and met another jalopy with a swaying buggy-top that had to head for the ditch. Hattie swung hard to the right, the other driver's scary screech lifting her hat right off her hair-do. She braked to a stop, got out and walked back and looked down the slope. The head of Waldo Sump protruded above the buggy-top. The front end of his runabout had turned into an accordion by contact with the trunk of a tree, and steam was hissing out of it. Waldo's eyes were glassy.

When Waldo finally extricated himself and was standing on terra firma he gave Hattie to understand that she would have to prove by four lawyers that she'd ever had a ma or pa. "You homely-faced tub of lard!" he yowled. "Why don't you look where you're goin'?"

"No kiddin', chowderhead," Hattie retorted. "Ha, I'll take vanilla. Why don't you go where you're lookin'? You had no right t' be on the wrong side of the road the same time as me. I kin prove that in court!"

"You will, hah? You got no chancet, you fat ol' she billygoat," Waldo fumed. "You fergit I'm the Mos' Worshipful Master of The Exalted an' Ennobled Sons of the White Brahma. They'll pack the jury an'—"

"An' I'll raise the rent on their meetin' hall," Hattie countered. "Double! I'll sue 'em fer eight years back rent. Now, what was it you was sayin', Bub?"

"Er, I was excited, Hattie. How about givin' me a hand, huh?"

"You wouldn't like where I'd give it t' you, Waldo," Hattie grinned and sniffed at the air. "M-m-m, such a nice smell of lemon. I'll see you at the river, Waldo, when all Milldew's sins are washed away. Amen. Adios."

"Oh, you wait," Waldo yelped as Hattie drove away. "I'll skin you of your tough old hide an' use it for a sweat rag!"

"I can't hear what he is sayin'," Hattie chuckled as she rode, "but I bet he ain't wishin' a poor ol' widder health an' happiness. Right now he is a master of a loco lodge."

WHEN Hattie's jalopy came to a stop in the yard of the T-Bone spread, a chunky moon-faced youngster stopped working on an old mowing machine and shuffled across the yard. "Good afternoon, ma'am," Hungerford Fife said, and tipped his old hat. "You won't never be sorry you hired me t' look after the T-Bone truck garden, nope. I won't never fergit you fer believin' I never robbed that bank."

"Sometimes I git the funniest hunches, Hungerford," Hattie sniffed. "I think you are innercent, which don't prove you are. Why didn't you give 'em no alibi, huh?"

"Promise you won't never tell?"

"Hope t' die," Hattie snapped. "Hurry up."

"There was a widder woman in New Eden," the ex-bank swamper whispered. "She was left some money, Hattie. I courted her until I saw I had a chancet with Nettie. The widder is s' homely, though. An' I fell in love with Nettie even if it wa'n't my idea to at first. Well, I writ the widder some letters an' I thought I'd git blackmailed. But when I went over t' see her on the night the bank was robbed she was glad t' give 'em back as she'd fell in love with the foreman of the New Eden garbage disposal department. If I'd told the gran' jury, Nettie would of knowed about my past an' would think I was only after her money like I was after the widder's. I mean—"

Hattie fanned herself with her reticule. "Oh, gobs. Someday sometime I'll go somewheres an' go over that ag'in, Hungerford," she sighed. "You ever been baptized?"

Hungerford looked scared. "Don't that mean gittin' a bath, Hattie? Heck, no!"

"Well, you're goin' t' be," Hattie said. "It is the only way Milldew will be saved. Comes Judgment Day we kin face our Maker with a smile. All sinners like you—"

"I never robbed that bank!"

"Oh, that ain't what I mean, Hungerford. The Devil comes in many ashpects, like in a jug of elderberry, the rovin' eye of a maid, an' in a deck of cards, my friend. Say, has your Uncle Jabe got a hoarst voice, an' a laugh like a tickled hyena?"

"Only saw him oncet, Hattie. I was only two years old so don't remember," Hungerford Fife said.

"H-m-m. You still in love with Nettie Turple?"

"Can you git a steak off a cow?" the would be sod buster gulped. "She's prettier than three spotted dogs ridin' in a red wagon, an' when I see her with that lock of hair fallin' down over her left eye, my heart goes pumpity-pump. How much does it cost t' git to Alaska? I must go there t' fergit. I got no chancet against that admittance man."

"You got t' prove you never robbed that bank, huh?" Hattie said. "That'll be easy, dearie, like gittin' mushmelons off a hackberry tree. Well, you tell Ike t' have the boys ready when the Reverend Snadgropper names the day. Your only chance is in prayer, Hungerford. For the firs' time in me life I find meself over a barrel an' have got t' admit I got t' have more help than what is in me noggin. Adios."

Getting out of her Model T in front of her office, Hattie met Judge Tolliver and Midas Moody. The judge waved a legal paper in Hattie's face. "You're Mrs. Hattie Pringle?"

"Maybe you was expectin' Lily Langtree, you ol' fraud! Who the aitch you think I am?"

"Just legal percedure," Tolliver sniffed. "I hereby serve you with this subpeener t' appear in court. You are charged with wreckin' personal property belongin' t' one Waldo Sump t' the tune of five hun'red dollars, breakin' up two hun'red dollars worth of lemon an' vanilla extrack, an' inflictin' a hun'red dollars worth of personal damage on the aforesaid Sump. Failure t' appear will be contempt of court."

"If I show up you will see how much contempt I got for it," Hattie yelped. "An' what are you here for, you droolin' ol' cross between a senile jassack an' the seven years itch?" she threw at Moody.

"Just come t' remind you t' fix that fence on the T-Bone north pasture, Hattie," Moody grinned. "I ain't takin' over no property less'n it is in A-1 condition, sabe?" Midas Moody reared back and laughed with great gusto and Hattie snatched the legal paper from Judge Tolliver's grasp, balled it up quickly and leaped toward Moody. "I'll make you eat it, you ol' bone rack an' you'll be burpin' legal words the rest of your life!"

MIDAS MOODY back-pedalled, tripped over the edge of the walk and landed all spread out like a Navajo rug. Hattie was kneeling on his chest when the parson and three other citizens arrived. The Reverend Snadgropper was horrified and said so. "You, sister! A piller of the church—!"

"Hand me the piller an' I'll shove that down his gullet, too, pars—er—huh. It must of been a touch of the sun," Hattie gulped. She got to a vertical position, straightened her old hat and adjusted her stays. "Broke me cameo brooch, too. H—!"

"I'll git a warrant out, too, Judge!" Moody yelped. "I got witnesses she tried t' murder me!"

"Yep," Hattie said to the parson. "I need t' git saved."

She lumbered away, walked into the Mill-

dew jewelry and notion store, and saw Waldo Sump leaning over the counter getting a ring fitted to his right pinky.

" 'Bout time it got here," the extract agent griped. "Sure it's solid gol'? Bein' the Master of The Exalted an' Ennobled—"

He swung his head toward Hattie and could not have looked worse if he had suddenly swallowed a spiny lizard.

"Huh, thought it was a wagon I heard needin' greasin'," he said, and turned away again. "Yep, I'm glad I lost that other lodge ring. Chip diamon' in this one, Charlie."

"I won't never eat another lemon or a vanilla custard ag'in," Hattie snapped. "It would remind me of a perfumery kitty. Charlie, I got a brooch here needs—"

NETTIE TURPLE minced in and hooked her arm through one of Waldo's. "Was you waitin' long, Waldy, darlin'? I got hung up at the hair dressers."

"I wisht that wa'n't only a figment of speech," Hattie whooshed out.

"Ah, my kitten, you are positively ravishin'," Sump said. "We shall have a soda, then see the show at the Bijou, after which we will motor out into the country by moonlight. How could this have happened to me?"

"It should of," Hattie sniffed. "Nettie, have you heard of the hangin' gardens at Babylon?"

"I never go t' lynchin's, Hattie Pringle."

"Oh, bushwash," Hattie snapped. "It is where they worshiped a gold calf like you are doin' now. You'd better be at the river. Amen."

She walked out of the store and over to the job printing office. Before noon of the next day, big signs appeared at points of vantage in the Montana town. They proclaimed:

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Hattie was in her office explaining it all to Pete. "It is a revival, you ol' stewbum. If you had embraced some kind of faith instead of a lamp post of a Saturday night, the Lord might 've seed fit to defleck that outlaw's bullet that turned you into a spook. I got robbed of four thousan' dollars. That north pasture at the T-Bone is worth twicet that much. The Milldew bank was looted of eight thousand an' is on the verge of bein' unsolvent. Yep, we got t' git down on our knees now an' ast some help. I sure wisht you could talk, Pete, seein' as how you know fer sure what the parson is jus' kind of guessin' at. But it's a good thing everythin' has turned out like this as water would of killed you anyways. Oh, glory me."

MILLDEW was really behind a big eight-ball. Citizens used coffee cans in lieu of the bank. The Clarion came out with a wingding of an editorial that burned the seat of John Law's pants. It intimated that Milldew had asked for what had happened to it by letting an old avaricious hen turkey like Hattie Pringle twirl it around her fingers.

That night the law had to move in on the editorial office. The editor was on the floor, the contents of a big paste pot in his hair and his face smeared with printer's ink. Slugs of type were scattered all around him as thick as rice after a wedding. He was coughing up a clipping of his editorial when help arrived.

"Help me up, pronto!" the Milldew Horace Greeley yipped. "Bigges' tornado in hist'ry. How many dead? Got t' write it up. Oncet a newspaper man, always—!"

The chief of police found the cherry there, and he knew it was off Hattie's hat, and quickly got rid of it.

The rains came the next day. Three days later Goose Creek was trying to climb its banks. "An omen, brethren an' sistern," the parson told his flock in the lodge hall. "The Lord has cleansed the waters an' has give us enough. See you there tomorrow. Amen."

They came from Milldew and from miles around to be baptized, and the left bank of Goose Creek was lined solidly with repenters at the zero hour. The Reverend Simeon Snadgropper stood in the water up to his middle, the Book in his hand.

"I sure hope the dam don't bust," Hattie said as she pulled her oilskin slicker around her ample waist. "The current is gittin' stronger every minute. Better start savin' fast, Parson."

The sky pilot called his flock out one by one and immersed them and baptized them in the name of the Lord, and Goose Creek seemed to rush along faster with each ceremony as if it wanted its water to hurry away with the sins that had been shed. The parson finally called the name of Hattie Pringle, and

Waldo Sump, standing apart from the flock, yipped, "Better dunk her twicet, Parson. One try won't never soak her through, ha!"

A roar of laughter partly drowned out the ominous sound from up the creek. Just as Hattie went under, the dam broke wide apart, and when she got her head above the surface and had cleared it, she saw the Reverend Snadgropper splashing frantically shoreward. She heard the roars of the flood waters and turned her head to take a look.

"Gobs of fire!" she screeched, and tried to get her water-logged carcass out of there. "Ha-a-lp! I'm drowndin'!"

The current swept her off her feet and carried her downstream and she flailed the water like a hippopotamus and yelled as loud. "Well, I'm comin', Pete," she finally told herself as she was swept around a bend. "Me sins caught up t' me. I had too many, yep. Set another table in the sweet bye an' bye an' —oops, there's a chunk of tree limb an' if I kin just grab-ug-glug-grab it. Clutchin' at a straw is all. I weigh almos' two hun'red an' that wouldn't hold up a singin' midget. What kin I lose—ug—ug—glub—though?"

She got hold of the tree limb and even though half-drowned, wondered why it checked her progress to a watery grave. It was as if a pair of strong arms had hold of it underneath and was playing her a game of tug of war.

Hattie hung on and then became aware that she was slowly dragging the limb toward shore. Somebody yelled at her from the bank and she looked up to see the lass rope flying at her. The loop settled right over her head and was pulled tight. Hattie's eyes bulged and she asked the Lord to please drown her instead of lynching her as she'd never stolen any live stock. When she got her wits back,

[*Turn page*]

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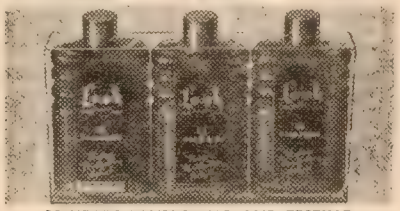

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she was spread out on soft grass and birds sang over her head. She looked up and recognized Ike Pelky, her foreman at the T-Bone. "Well, I never made paradise, did I?" she sighed. "As would you be here?"

"You had a close squeak, Hattie," Ike said. "In another minute you would of choked t' death. Good thing I was late gettin' t' the bapchizin'. How in aitch did that limb hold you up s' long, Hattie?"

"It wa'n't the limb, you unbeliever. It was the Lord. Well, git some dry sticks an' make a fire," Hattie yelped. "I'm soaked worst than Pete ever was."

HATTIE wondered why the main street was deserted when she got back to town. She went into the Chinese laundry to ask the reason why and the little oriental tossed his flatiron away and went out through an open window. "An' I wasn't goin' after no back rent," Hattie mumbled and went out. She saw dim light shining in the windows of the lodge hall and crossed the street. She went upstairs and tippy-toed into the hall and saw that all the citizens seated there were staring into their laps and mumbling a prayer. "Wonder who's dead," Hattie asked herself and took a seat in back.

The Reverend Snadgropper intoned, "Ashes to ashes an' dust t' dust. Amen."

Hattie tapped a mourner on the shoulder and asked who had departed this life and he swung his head around just as the parson snapped the Book shut.

"Hattie Pringle, Ma'am. She—ow-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-w-!"

"What's eatin' you, huh? Hattie P—why that's me!" She got to her feet, and women fainted. The Reverend Snadgropper's legs buckled and he grabbed at Judge Tolliver for support. "She—come back! Look, sister, I didn' do it on purpose. That current was s' strong I knowed I couldn't save—"

"Aw, she ain't no ghost," Waldo Sump yelped. "She's still got eight lives left, the ol' she bobcat! Sometimes even a whale gits beached an'—"

"You sassy yahoo!" Hattie howled and barged down the aisle. Waldo Sump was with Nettie Turple but he had no other thought at the moment save the first law of nature. He went out of a window and onto a sloping roof and let out a wild yell as his feet slipped out from under him. There was a great splashing sound soon after he slipped over the edge and Hattie had her first laugh since being saved from a watery grave. "Said he wouldn't git baptized, ha! That's the bigges' rain barrel out back I ever did see."

"We won't never git rid of you, by Godfrey!" Judge Tolliver wailed. "I never have no luck!"

People fought to get out of the lodge hall while Hattie chased Judge Tolliver around and around, brandishing a big mace that was used during lodge rituals. It was Hungerford Fife who picked up Nettie Turple and hauled her to safety. Nettie's eyes were crossed, and she had lost the plume off her hat which was resting over her left ear. A leg of mutton shirtsleeve was missing, and she had lost a shoe. "There now, honeygirl, it is Hungerford saved you. Your only true love, yep. I—"

"You go away, you bank robber!" Nettie squeaked, but held fast to Hungerford Fife just the same. "Oh, why did you do it, Hungerford? Let me go this instant. I must go to Waldo as he must need me."

"Yep, like he does a third ear, dearie," Hattie yelped. She tossed the mace aside and sat down heavily. "This kind of thing'll kill me yet. I'd had that ol' rip if he hadn't fell down the whole flight of stairs. I woulda tore him limb from limb! I'd of—" Hattie suddenly snapped her lips together. "Limb? I wisht I could figger out—huh, you should be ashamed, Hattie Pringle. Questionin' the way of the Almighty. Scoffin' at a miracle that happened just fer you."

Hungerford was pleading with Nettie. The maid was adamant. "No! It is all over between us, Hungerford! I have plighted my trough. Waldo's past is spotless. I won't never have no child of mine hangin' his head in shame when somebody tells him his pa was a thief! Never! I have spoken!"

"Next week, Bertha The Sewin' Machine Gal," Hattie sniffed. "At popular prices. Go to that sissy britches an' see how much Hungerford cares! If I was your ma I'd dust your rompers, no kiddin'!"

"Yep, go!" the doleful swain orated. "This time tomorrer I'll be on my way t' the Klondike t' fergit. What chancet has a man got bein' guilty an' innercent at the same time? It is like marryin' a half-breed, huh? Nettie Turple, I go out of your life. Farewell forever."

HATTIE and Nettie climbed into the Model T and rode toward the Turple

homestead. Hattie heard a gulp and looked down at the girl. "Why you are cryin', dearie," she said. "You love Hungerford, huh? Tell ol' Hattie."

"You shut up!" Nettie nasaled. "It is because I am to marry Waldo day after tomorrow. We will go to the city where—sniff—sniff—we can live up to our stations in life."

"Bushwash," Hattie growled, and slammed on the brakes. "Here's your house, Modom. Shall I step out an' open the caw door for you, what? Not while I'm conscious. Jump out as I ain't got all night, Duchess. Lord Wellsbottom is waitin' fer me in the drawin' room at me country estate. We will shoot grouses on the moors."

"Hmph!" Nettie snorted, and got clear of the jalopy a split second before Hattie stepped on the gas.

In her own bailiwick, Hattie Pringle took a snort of elderberry, to ward off a cold of course, and fell into a rocker and deep thought. Outside a hoot owl exercised its vocal assembly. A coyote sassed it back. The arthritis in Hattie's left knee started getting nasty. A tree branch scraped along the sides of the house. "Just can't git me mind offen a limb," she said. "It would of took more than a miracle t' hold a mama porpoise like me t' a ten pound limb. Goose Creek was runnin' faster'n a jackrabbit with a pound of buckshot just behind it but that lim—I can't sleep, nope." Hattie got up and reached for her coat. "I got t' see that limb so's I can believe in a miracle. T'see if the likes of me gits a reward fer embracin' real religion."

It was the witching hour when Hattie Pringle got out of the Model T on the banks of Goose Creek where her foreman had thrown her the rope. The clouds had scattered and a three-quarter moon gave out with plenty of light. Hattie paused on the bank and peered out into the stream that had slowed down considerably since the baptism. There it was, bobbing around on the surface and going nowhere. "Ain't possible. No angel of the Lord would holt onto it from below this long until another drowndin' sinner happened by."

Hattie drove to the T-Bone and routed out Ike Pelky and a little hammered-down banty named Absent Tweedy. "Git a rope an' come with me, boys," she said, her back turned, knowing that pajamas and bathrobes had not yet caught on in bunkhouses. "I am out on a

[*Turn page*]

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limb yet, an' I'll try anythin' once."

Grumbling, the T-Bone rannies climbed into the Model T and Hattie drove back to Goose Creek. They all piled out and went to the bank and looked out at the piece of driftwood that refused to drift. "Somethin' funny about that, Ike," Hattie said. "What's keepin' it there?"

"Huh," the foreman said. "Is mighty mysterious, ain't it? Awright. Absent, you swim out there an' put two ropes on that limb. I git cramps if I git nex' t' water."

"You don't hate it no more'n I do," the little cowpoke argued. "I'll quit first!"

"Oh, bushwash," Hattie sniffed. "There is a flat-bottomed boat right over there under our noses. Go git it an' stop gripin'."

IKE PELKY and Absent Tweedy went out in the boat and maneuvered close to the floating limb. They pulled it off the surface of the water and even Hattie could see the ropes already tied to it. "Awright, Absent," Ike grunted. "Heave—ho!"

"Shore is heavy," Absent said. "Maybe it is a corpse, Ike."

"Pull, you li'l runt, an' shut up! I got a good holt. One—two—three!"

The cowpokes kept laboring. Slowly they made progress and soon they lifted a big bulky object clear of the waters and dumped it into the bottom of the boat. They rowed ashore and dragged the find onto dry land and Hattie knelt down and examined it. "Oil cloth," she said. "Wonder what's in it, huh? Git your knife out, Ike."

The T-Bone foreman slashed at ropes that bound the big package and soon ran the knife along the water-proofed fabric. Out of the slit tumbled a big stone. Ike reached in and pulled out three more and then came up with a handful of something that bugged his eyes out. "Dinero, Hattie! We have found lost treasure! Maybe Spaniards—"

"Look, lunkhead, that rope an' limb would of been rotted a hun'red years ago," Hattie

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gulped. "Gather it all up an' dump it into the skitterbuggy. It is back t' the T-Bone we go, me hearties! Yo ho an' a bottle of redeye."

IN THE kitchen of the ranchhouse, Hattie and her employees sat around the table later, feasting their eyes on the evidence of bank and highway robbery.

"My four thousan' is there. All in hun'red dollar bills like I ast fer at New Eden. The rest belongs t' the Milldew Bank, gents. An' lookit what was stuck in a sheaf of this legal tender. A ring. Cameo of a white brahma. I'll reconstruct the crime. When the robber dumped the stuff into the sack he wore a ring that was a li'l too big an' it fell off an' he never missed it until he'd had the loot tied up an' sunk t' the bottom of Goose Creek. Too much bother t' go through it all ag'in. Anyway, who'd bother lookin' here but him?"

"Who is the polecat, Hattie?"

"One smellin' of lemon extrack an' vanilla," Hattie snorted. "A admittance man, huh? Was goin' t' git left some dinero by relatives, was he? Just a crock an' bull story so's we wouldn't be suspicious when he started

[*Turn page*]

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spendin' the ill-got gains. Yep, Waldo Sump bought hisself a new lodge ring couple of days ago. Le's go, boys."

It was early morning in Milldew. Hattie stopped at Miss Nettie Turple's domicile and banged her knuckles on the front door. Nettie responded to the summons and seemed very indignant. "I want no truck with you, Mrs. Pringle! Please leave my—"

"Hold your camisole on, dearie," Hattie said. "Git your hat, too, as I want t' show you the guest we got in the hoosegow. You could never giss in a thousand years."

"Hungerford Fife, that's who. Finally proved it on him, huh? Well, I can't wait until I see him where he rightfully belongs," Nettie snapped.

"Yep, found the bandanna he used when he stuck me up," Hattie said as she drove Nettie to the Milldew lockup. "An' the scenery he used when bein' a bandit. He's confessed t' everythin' even to not usin' his right name."

Nettie Turple walked into the law office and into the back room. Waldo Sump got up from a bench and peered at her through the bars. "Come t' crow, banjo eyes? Well, you got the right neck fer it. Got too hoggish, I did. Wanted your bankroll, too, sister. Of all the blankety blasted luck! That ol' fatso had t' git carried away by a flood an' of all the limbs in the creek she had t' grab that one I—"

But Nettie Turple was in a swoon and propped up by Hattie Pringle. Judge Tolliver and a dozen leading citizens of Milldew came into the lockup panting for breath. "Hattie, we heard you—?" Tolliver gasped out. "Tell us it's so, you ol' foxess. Recovered all the dinero. Captured the culprit. How did you do it, huh?"

"The Reverend Snadgropper said we'd git saved if we embraced the faith right, didn't

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NEXT ISSUE'S

HATTIE PRINGLE HOWLER

•

THE BEARD

AND

THE PROFIT

By JOE ARCHIBALD

he? How elst could I have been swep' away by flood waters t' where Waldo Sump hid his swag? The Lord takes awayeth but he also giveth back," Hattie said, then took a long deep breath. "The bank's money is in me office safe, Judge."

Three days later Hattie Pringle sold a chunk of real estate to a blushing bride so that the groom could get a belated start in life. Midas Moody started imbibing at the Milldew House on Thursday and lost track of an entire weekend. The sky pilot broke ground for the new church and all was well in the town of Milldew. Hattie Pringle had done it again.

She told Pete as she stood in front of his picture, "Better late than never, you ol' sinner! I see the light now." She took the picture off the wall and carried it out of the office. People of Milldew stared and wondered as they watched her unwrap a flat object and immerse it in a rain barrel at the corner of the dry goods store. "In the name of the Lord," Hattie said under her breath. "For better or fer worst, in sickness as well as—well, that's near enough. Amen."

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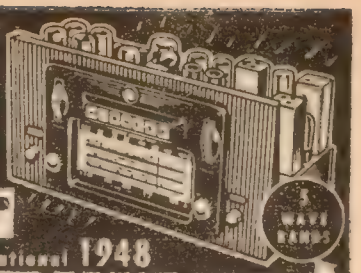

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AROUND THE BRANDING FIRE

(Continued from page 8)

Her Willy laughed to reassure her, but she noted that he himself stayed on guard all of that night, not trustin' their safety to anybody else in their little wagon train. All that night she held her baby close to her breast, listenin' to the sounds o' Bill Cody's horse's hoofs as he rode around camp. Now and then he came to the wagon to reassure her.

They reached the little settlement o' Rome at night. To their surprise they saw ahead of them, over the ridge, a single light burnin', instead o' lights from a hundred houses. They found the light was comin' from a saloon. The barkeeper told them the "town" had moved over to Fort Hays. Word had got around that the railroad wasn't comin' that way.

"Well, Louisa," Bill Cody said to his wife, "there goes our dream o' wealth, darlin', but we've got to make the best of it. There's a room in back of the saloon where we can sleep tonight," he added, bein' a practical man.

Louisa's heart beat fast as she took one look into the bar room and saw the rough crowd of bullwhackers and frontiersmen gathered there, drinkin' and playing cards.

The room behind the bar was separated from it by a thin partition, and the wall didn't even reach clear to the ceilin'. Louisa was thankful for her Willy's fine strength and lovin' arms in that wild place when she went to bed.

Injun Trouble

Suddenly, out o' the night, a courier come, his horse in a lather from the hard run from Fort Hays. He brought a message from Major Arms at the fort, sayin' Bill Cody was needed at once—Injun trouble was expected. This was the call o' duty, and Cody had to go.

While Louisa courageously held back her tears, he flung into his saddle and was away like a streak o' lightnin'. Louisa, holdin' tight to the gun Cody had left her, locked herself and baby in the room behind the bar for the night. The thin walls didn't shut out the sounds any more than paper would o' done, and the crowd was rough.

As the night wore on voices rose higher, some quarrelsome, and a pistol shot cracked

just outside Louisa's door. She clutched her baby to her heart, scared half to death, but kept mighty still. But the little one had been wakened by the shot and noise o' scufflin' feet, and loud voices.

She began to cry at the top o' her voice. There was a few minutes o' silence, then the sound o' feet, and a knock sounded at her door.

Drunken voices outside asked Mrs. Cody to open her door. Anyone could kick the door in with no effort at all, Louisa knew. She took her gun in her hand and, going to the door, opened it, confrontin' the men outside.

"Ma'am, we wantta see Bill Cody's young-un," they told her, and Louisa let them in. Afterwards, it was funny when she remembered how those rough men had looked tiptoeing across the floor to where the baby lay. They thanked her for lettin' them look at Bill's "Funny lookin' critter", and filed out o' the room.

Closed Before Sunup

The bar actually closed before sunup next mornin', and Louisa was told that this unusual occurrence had taken place out o' respect for her privacy, to sort o' honor Bill Cody's wife and baby.

Bill rode back to her next mornin', not aware that anything had happened. He took her with him to Fort Hays. There he was obliged to house her in a tent on the edge o' camp, for the only hotel in the place was crowded to overflowin' with folks goin' to California, many o' them bein' women goin' to join up with their army officer husbands. Rates was twelve dollars a day per room.

A Wild Fight

Again Cody was obliged to leave immediately on a scoutin' expedition. The tents where Louisa and her little girl was sleepin' had a guard for protection, but durin' the night he left his post to go get hisself a drink. That night Louisa's tent was knocked down by fightin' men o' two rival factions that hated Bill Cody. They sure fought all over the place.

When the center pole o' the tent fell, Louisa managed to crawl outside through the melee o' fightin' men. She was no sooner clear o' the tent than she was grabbed by a tough hombre, after he'd knocked her gun from her hand. She was battered to the

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ground by the big brute, helpless now, except for woman's deadliest weapon—she screamed with all her might.

The guard and a bunch o' soldiers come runnin' to her rescue, and the hombre dashed away into the night at their approach. It was thought the two rival factions had each been bent on doin' harm to Cody's wife and baby that night, but surprised each other by arrivin' at the same moment, and started fightin' then and there.

Louisa Cody had many another hair-raisin' experience, fightin' off Injuns with Cody at one time, and barely escapin' with their lives. Cody was savin' one bullet for his wife, and that was how she wanted it.

Yep, little Louisa Cody learned about pioneerin' the hard way, but she sure stuck fast to her Willy, otherwise known as Buffalo Bill. I reckon most o' you pretty gals o' the range would do the same today, if it was up to you. Betcha!

Letters from Our Readers

SHORE amuses me when folks worry about not gettin' any mail for maybe a couple of days. I can remember times back on the ranch when we would be plumb snowed in for the winter. Some times none of us in the outfit were even able to get to town for supplies and the mail for a couple of months.

"Well, I guess I will write a letter," old Panhandle Joe would say, when we found we were holed-in. "Might as well get started."

And when he was not eating, sleeping or doing what little work there was that could be done, Panhandle would be writing that letter. He would keep it up for days, and then when Spring came and the snows melted the letter would be finished.

"That's it," Panhandle always said, and then he would read the letter over and frown. "Ah, shucks, this ain't very good."

We would all wait, even though we knew what was coming next. Panhandle Joe would tear up the letter, and none of us would say a word. You see, we knew that he didn't have any relatives and what friends he had were working with him in the outfit. Panhandle Joe just didn't really have anyone to whom he could send that letter.

Thinking about that shore makes me glad that all you folks in THE BRANDING FIRE

CLUB do have friends to whom yuh can write. And yuh can write us, too—we certainly have some mighty fine correspondence from the members!

If there are some of yuh that haven't yet joined THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB, then get busy and do it right away. Yuh'll find the coupon in this department. All yuh got to do is fill it out and mail it to us with a stamped, self-addressed return envelope so we can send you yore free membership card right away.

Gather around, folks. Time we got to looking over some of the mighty fine letters we have been getting. Just to be shore to get in as many letters as possible we may cut your letter down a little—but it's just to save space. And remember we are shore thanking all of yuh for writing and joining THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB. Here we go:

I am 16 years old, have brown hair, blue eyes, and am 5 feet 8 inches tall. My hobbies are reading, collecting postcards and listening to music. I enjoy most any sport from hiking to dancing, although it's very little I can dance. I'd love to hear from anyone who would care to write.

Edith Edwards.

Hiwassee, Virginia.

I am 15 years old, have blond hair and brown

[*Turn page*]

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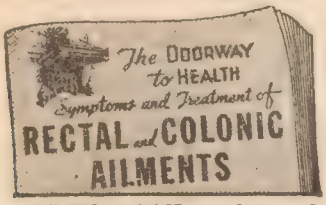

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eyes, 5 feet 11½ inches tall. I enjoy all kinds of sports and my hobby is collecting miniature dogs. I would like very much to write to anyone in the world, of teen age, preferably. I will always continue reading the exciting stories in THRILLING RANCH STORIES.

Gertrude Mueller.
615 Mariposa Ave, Tulare, California.

I have been a reader of THRILLING RANCH STORIES for some time and enjoyed the books a lot. I am 34 years old, 5 feet 9 inches tall and weigh 180 lbs. My hobbies are letter writing, traveling, driving cars, trick horseback riding, skating and going to shows. I promise to answer all letters promptly.

Harry N. Casner.
c/o Wilber Bonnister, R. R. 1, Middleton, Mich.

I am 30 years old, 5 feet 2, and weigh 191 lbs. I have auburn hair and blue eyes. I live in the city where they make kodaks and glasses, but like ranching the best. Have been on a farm most of my life, so that's why I am lonely. Have read THRILLING RANCH STORIES for the past three years and can hardly wait until the next issue is off the press.

Vera E. Kent.
379A Troup Street, Rochester 11, N. Y.

I am a young married woman 25 years of age, 5 feet 2 inches tall, weigh 102 lbs., have light brown hair and blue eyes. My hobby is collecting miniatures of horses and I would like to enlarge my collection by exchanging hobbies with others. I also like to sew and go to the movies. Will also exchange snapshots.

Mrs. Hazel Thresher.
Box 169, West Brookfield, Mass.

I have just finished my second issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES. It sure is a fine magazine. I am 5 feet 11 inches tall, weigh 198 lbs., have blue-gray eyes, dark hair and am 62 years old. Will gladly answer all letters.

George C. Burbank.
721 Railroad Street, Decatur, Alabama.

I am 16 years old, 5 feet 3 inches tall. Have brown hair and blue eyes. My favorite sports are volleyball and swimming and bicycling. My hobby is collecting snapshots. Would like to hear from people around the world.

Geneva Hunkapiller.
Cresent, Oregon.

I am 16 years old, 5 feet 11 inches tall. Have black hair and weigh 162 lbs. I like all sports and like horses and dogs the best. Would like everybody to write.

John C. Folkmann.
R. R. 1, Didsbury, Alta, Canada.

I am a young boy 5 feet tall, have brown hair. I like all outdoor sports, mostly horseback riding. I would like everybody to write.

Robert Folkmann.
R. R. 1, Didsbury, Alta, Canada.

I am 16 years old with brown hair and blue eyes. I like singing, dancing, swimming, skating and writing letters but my favorite sports are ball games and hockey games. Will exchange

snapshots and promise to answer all letters.

Mary Brunt.

103 Young Street, Truro, N. S. Canada.

Many times I have seen letters from other countries writing to you for pen pals. I have now enlarged my "Hobby Pen Pals" in exchanging letters with them. I have pursued my hobby since 1935 and enjoy writing. I am 5 feet 2 inches tall, 26 years old, blond and have blue eyes. I like all kinds of sports, especially horseback riding. I have been married five years and have a little girl and boy. We have horses and a collie dog named "Mac." I will exchange photos, postcards, papers, magazines, etc., about Colorado and the United States. I prefer to write to those from out of the U. S. A. so as to further my hobby.

Mrs. George J. Beckman, Jr.

1105 Vance Street, Denver 15, Colorado.

I am 14 years old, 5 feet 3 inches tall, have brown hair and green eyes. My favorite hobby is collecting pictures of Roy Rogers. I enjoy all sports, particularly horseback riding. I like THRILLING RANCH STORIES better than any of the Western magazines. Will answer all letters.

Anne Gallagher.

R. D. 2, Ridley Creek Road, Media, Pa.

I am 25 years old, 5 feet 7 inches tall. Have blond hair and blue eyes. My hobbies are collecting fancy cushion tops and writing letters. I also like most sports, especially going to the Calgary Stampede and hockey games. The things I enjoy most at the Stampede are the chuckwagon races, also the bronc riding. I will promise to answer all the letters I receive and hope to be able to tell some things of interest.

Mrs. Elsie Armit.

Box 391, Rocky Mt. House, Alberta, Canada.

I am 18 years old, have blond hair and blue eyes, and am 5 feet 8½ inches tall. My favorite hobbies are dancing, hiking, singing and letter writing. Every letter answered.

Robert D. Chase.

Margaretville, N. J.

I've been reading THRILLING RANCH STORIES for quite a few years now and enjoy it. I spent 41 months in the Air Corps as an instrument flying instructor. Since I was discharged I've done a bit of traveling. I'm 25 years old, 5 feet 7 inches tall and weigh 155 lbs. Have auburn hair and blue eyes—my friends call me "Red." My hobbies are varied and numerous. A partial list includes horseback riding, bowling, baseball, amateur movies, stamp collecting, postcard collecting, and writing and receiving letters. I'll exchange snaps with everyone who writes.

Ira B. Oliver.

203 Broad Street, Honesdale, Pa.

I am 5 feet 7 inches tall, have brown hair and very dark brown eyes. I like all sports. My favorite pastimes are swimming, reading, dancing and letter writing. I will exchange snaps.

Kathryn Strotman.

425 Linden Street, Covington, Kentucky.

I am a reader of THRILLING RANCH STORIES and enjoy it very much. Am 21

[*Turn page*]

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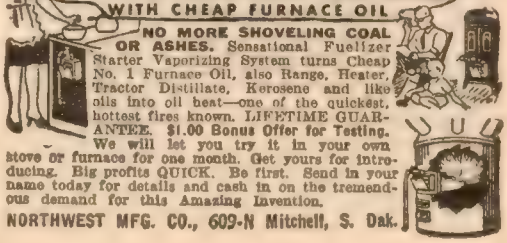

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years old, have light brown hair, blue eyes, and am 5 feet 5½ inches tall. Enjoy all outdoor sports, music, reading and going to the movies. My hobby is to write and receive letters, so everybody write and all letters will be answered.

Betty Jane Shirley.
1143 East Leafland Ave., Decatur 19, Illinois.

I am 16 years old, 5 feet 6 inches tall. Have gray eyes and naturally wavy brown hair. Weigh 120 lbs. My hobby is collecting pencil drawings and paintings of anything—mostly horses and pin-up girls. I promise a quick reply to all letters and will exchange snapshots with anyone.

Ethel Alcock.
Route 5, Auburn, N. Y.

That's about all we'll quote from this time, but we shore are thanking everybody for writing and we'll be using more of yore fine letters next time. And here's a list of some folks who are now BRANDING FIRE CLUB members:

Mrs. Harriette Husted, 220 Deptea Road, Eatson Rapids, Michigan.
Mary Green, 28975 Sunny Oak, Detroit 23, Michigan.
Sally Hodges, Longview Dairy, Garysburg, N. C.
Inga Rongved, P. O. Box 882, Hot Springs, South Dakota.
William Musser, Route 3, Benton, Pa.
Harvey Stafford, R. R. 9, Box 428, Richmond, 24 Va.
Josephine Mandel, P. O. Box 7793, De Valle Station, Los Angeles, 15, Calif.
Evelyn Rutherford, Siren, Wisconsin.
W. R. Long, Drawer J J, Dublin, Texas.
Wanda Helen Hargraves, Route 1, Box 27 G, Dyess, Ark.
Estelle Poole, Rt. 1, Box 75-B, Sunflower, Mississippi.
Evelyn Bullock, Rt. 1, Sunflower, Mississippi.
Charles Waters, 2242 Cedley Street, Baltimore, 30, Md.
Francis M. Clark, Lincoln, Nebraska.
George Speigellialter, 478 Chestnut Street, Conenaugh, Pa.
Artie Gibson, Sacramento, Kentucky.
Joey Nobel, O'Neill Rt., Star, Neb.
Olga Cheerney, 90 Beechwood Ave., Hamilton, Ont., Canada.
Bart Lukas, P. O. Box 421, Jacksonville, Texas.
Walter C. Reeve, Morden, Montana.
Mary Addison, Box 59, Centralia, Ill.
Mrs. Mary Lee Smith, Gen. Del. Stockyards Post Office, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.
Helen Linville, 247 Summit Ave., Greensboro, N. C.
Hazel Knox, 223 W. Commerce, Dallas, Texas.
Willie Mae Hughes, c/o Baldwin Drug Store, Kennett, Mo.
Warfield E. Shiplet, 404 Hodgson Street, Oxford, Pa.
Betty Hamilton, Armington, Ill.
Virginia Somers, 41 Ripley Street, Somerset, Mass.
Zola Martin, 109 Cedar Ave., So. Minneapolis, Minn.
Grace Mulligan, Route 1, Corry, Pa.
Sylvester Stafford, 263 Park Blvd., Marion, Ohio.
Mrs. M. F. Crownover, Rt. 11, Box 429, Portland 6, Oregon.
Virginia Heiss, Burtonville, Kentucky.
Armella Weis, R. R. 1, Spragueville, Iowa.
June Greenway, Route 2, Prospect, Tenn.
Jean Cierley, Adamsville, Tenn.
Alice Jessen, Rt. 1, Box 116, Camp Douglas, Wis.
Iris Martinsen, Box 1354, Spartanburg, S. C.
Marie Roberts, 312 East Wabash, Route 6, Box 967A Sunnslope, Phoenix, Arizona.
Milly Resta, 565 W. Brady St., Butler, Penn.
Anna Purcell, Route 3, Rexburg, Idaho.
Mary Jo Porter, R. R. 3, Box 408 B, Independence, Mo.
Donna M. Alley, Blue Springs, Missouri.
W. W. McDowell, 3733-S. E. 40 Ave., Portland, 3 Oregon.

Gladys Abner, Fountain City, Knoxville, Tenn.
Chester Burchman, 107 Essex St., New York, 2 N. Y.
Eleanor Whitney, R. F. D. 2, East Jeffrey, N. H.
Neva Miller, Box 65, Jones, Michigan.
Sally Ball, Route 1, Brigham City, Utah.
Gertrude Sanchez, Box 106A, Belle Rose, La.
Ina Conger, 1313 N. Adams St., Bay City, Mich.

Shore was mighty nice to hear from all those members of THE BRANDING FIRE CLUB, and of course we are always plumb delighted to have more new members. Everybody please address yore letters and postcards to The Editor, THRILLING RANCH STORIES, 10 East 40th Street, New York, 16, N. Y. Thanks, pards!

Our Next Issue

I BEEN feeling as frisky as a spooky hoss on a frosty morning. Reckon that's why I climbed right up on top of my desk and started to dance a jig. As jigs go, the spirit was willing but the feet were weak.

"Having fun, Mr. Brown?" says a voice.

I stopped dancing and looked at the boss, and he kept right on looking at me. When he called me Mr. Brown instead of Tex it was a sign there were storm clouds in the east, and I just might be struck by lightning.

"I was," I said getting down off the desk. "But I ain't now."

"There's a reason for the merry mood," says the boss.

"Naturally," I says. "I have been expressin' my delight because of them."

"Them. Meaning just what?"

"Why the stories we got all lined up for the next issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES," I says. "Them yarns shore are grand."

"Sometimes I worry about yore grammar, Tex," says the boss. [*Turn page*]

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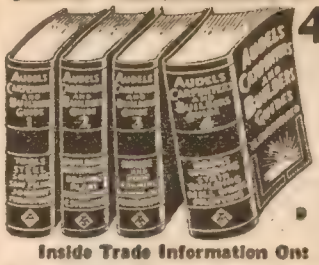

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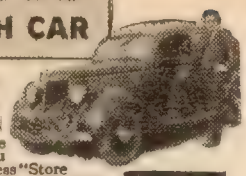

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"Grandma was all right last time I heard from her," I says.

The boss just looks at me, and there was something about his expression that made me feel I'd better get busy telling you readers about those stories in the next issue. So here goes!

First comes HIS OWN DEATH WARRANT, by Nels Leroy Jorgensen. Which shore is a novelet that packs plenty of drama and punch. Seems that Dan Sheridan picked a mighty dangerous mission for himself when he decided to find and protect a young waddy named Rusty Rand. There was only one reason Sheridan wanted to save Rand, and that was because he was sure Kathleen Calloner loved the younger man and Sheridan was willing to risk his life for the girl Here's the way the story starts:

Sheridan came in toward the end of it but in plenty of time to wind it up. Gunsmoke was still layering in thick clouds across the small hazed front room of the cantina when he stepped inside the half-open door. He couldn't see through the gray strata, but he knew the story.

He sensed the play even though he didn't know exactly what the incident had been bringing it on. When he had put up his tired palomino in the lean-to serving for a stable in this Border dive known simply as *Alamos*, he had taken time to observe the other horses there—one in particular, still steaming, that wore the Cross-Talon brand mark. He had known then and there that he had reached his destination and could look for trouble inside.

He had shifted his guns solemnly, taken a second .44 from his saddle bags to fill the empty holster and made sure his belts were adjusted before he went in. He walked into trouble—gunplay, oaths in two languages, a stricken cry and a typically Mexican wail of lamentation.

Sufficient light existed, however, for him to discern the man he had come seeking. There was a man on the floor, coughing out the wretched end of a wretched life in crimson blobs of blood. Him he knew too, and spared him only a passing glance. Recognizing him, he knew too, and strangely—oddly his brain was functioning—he knew why the man was coughing out his life on the sanded floor and why the long white-faced man was backed into one corner back near the big oaken window frame, with a single six-gun stabbing across the cantina space.

Hands within half a finger's reach of the twin six-guns he wore, undrawn as yet, he halted to survey the scene at his leisure. There was in Dan Sheridan a look that said he would always afford a second or two of leisure before bursting into abrupt, violent action.

The man Sheridan had trailed here seeking had backed into a corner, and his single .45 stayed level at the belt line. He was young, younger by a year

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or more than Sheridan, with youthful blue eyes, slightly bloodshot now, tawny yellow hair, and a beardless face unmarred except by faint traces of recent dissipation and anger.

One of the men who had been facing him lay stilled. Two more had scuttled to positions of vantage. One was in the corner near the door by which Sheridan had entered. On Sheridan's entrance everyone else but these had scuttled to relative safety. A ragged peon near the door had just ended a crawling, groping path which left him hidden, all but his espadrilled feet, under the makeshift wine-bar near the rear entrance which also gave into the *comida*.

The man by the door, almost unnoticed by Sheridan, cast a quick look about him, began carefully to bring up his gun. The yellow-haired youth cried out, but Sheridan, scarcely more than half turning, spoke:

"You've done your share of killin', Rusty," he said. "I'll get him!"

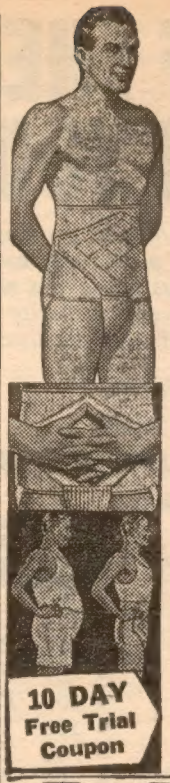
And that's the start of the tense scene where Sheridan finds Rusty Rand—and learns there is plenty of danger in store for him. How Sheridan faces his enemies and wins out makes HIS OWN DEATH WARRANT a novelet that packs plenty of punch! Every bit of it is as exciting as the little excerpt you just read.

Another of the longer stories in the next issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES is HUNGRY PASS, a splendid novelet by L. P. Holmes. Folks figgered that Kirk Dawson was plumb foolish when he bought a piece of property from Henry Spede, the lawyer, but Kirk shore knew what he was doing—though he found he had a fight on his hands to prove it to everyone else, includin' Nan Garrison. How he does so is told in HUNGRY PASS, a yarn filled with suspense from start to finish!

Last but not least of the novelets in the next issue is LOST VALLEY ROUNDUP, by Harold F. Cruickshank. Seems that Cal Barton is suspected of being a killer, but Julie Wade has faith in him, and the way in which things work out will fascinate you.

There will also be a number of carefully selected short stories and interesting features in the next issue of THRILLING RANCH STORIES, all of them filled with the drama and action of the cattle land. It will be a great issue. See you all then, folks.

—TEX BROWN



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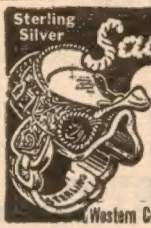

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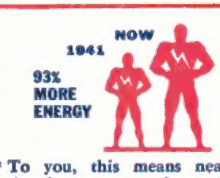

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